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Only a poor bull-fighter dies once—"The Trumpet Calls"—L. HUGHES

ANC

Short Stories

April

25¢

Look out for Chuck Holes

"The Sin of Wiley Brogan"

A novelette by

FRANK BONHAM

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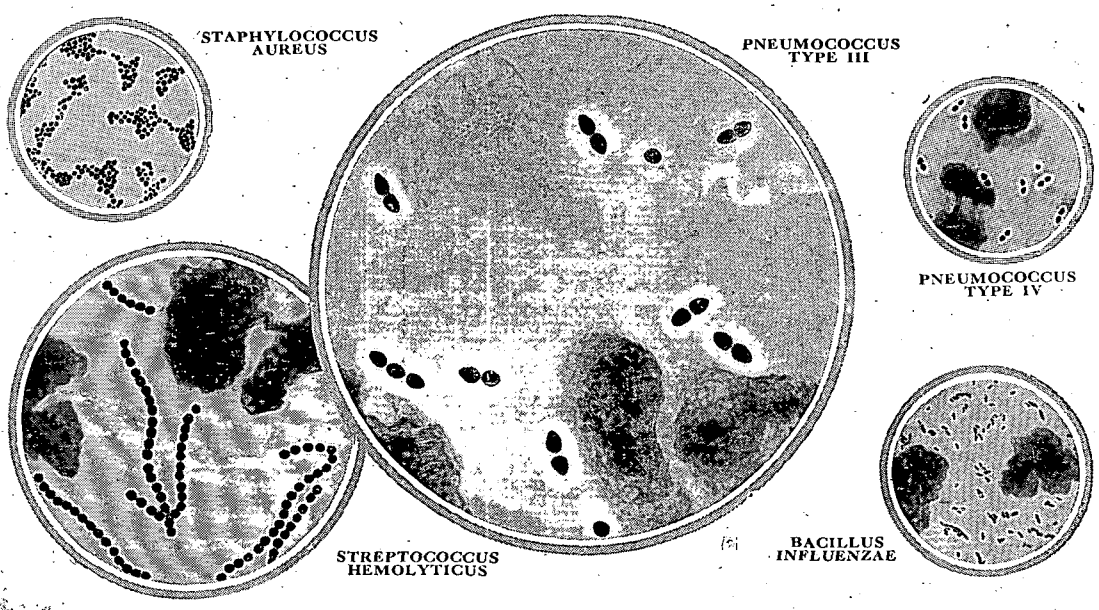

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FRANK GRUBER

○ He never forgot anything, he said, but he forgot to throw away the watch of the cowhand he slugged. That was howcome his hole card was a bloodstained deuce. . . . . .

"A Ticket to Chinook, Montana"

WALT COBURN

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APRIL, 1949

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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Stop the Sun, Stop the Moon—but Never Ask a Mail Driver to Stop His Coach!

THE SIN OF WILEY BROGAN

By FRANK BONHAM

I

TEMPTATION came to Wiley Brogan on the stage to Canyon City. His seducer may have been sent of the devil, but he wore the guise of a backwoods post office official with a look of raw country honesty about him. Two years before, Brogan would have been too young in spirit, too possessed of impossible ideals, to be capable of seduction. Two months earlier, even—sweating in a stage company corral on the Columbia River—he would have been too busy to notice that the card of introduction he had been handed spelled success.

But that October his defences were down. Like the apples of this untamed state of Oregon, he was ripe for picking—ripened by heat and discouragement and hard luck.

All summer he had trained horses for a stage company at The Dalles. He was a horse-breaker by trade. He had trained horses until there was nothing left to tame but the drivers, and with enough whiskey in him he had even been known to try that. It was a tough summer. Unreasonably hot. Fifty-dollar skates to work with, from which the corral boss expected four-hundred-dollar stage animals. At ten dollars a head.

In October, they discharged him with a pass and twenty dollars for the last two horses he had broken. The superintendent

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said there were two small outfits over east in Canyon City which might have something for him. He packed his grip, bought a handful of nickel cigars, and slung onto a Canyon City stage.

Riding on a company pass, he took what was left in the way of accomodations. What was left was a seat up on the hurricane deck behind the driver and messenger, in a rattling snow as gritty as salt. By the time they reached John Day River, his face was stiffer than a coyote pelt on a pasture fence. He would have liked a cigar, but the wind snatched the flame right off a matchstick. Up there on the hard leather seat with his coat collar turned up and his hat tipped down, he became gloomy and introspective. This was out-of-character for Brogan. Normally he was a good-humored man whose fault seemed to be lack of ambition, an affable and competent man-about-stables.

But he brooded over the fact that he was nearly thirty, that his education was mainly physical, that horses were so mortally stupid. He was getting tired of being a stable-hand. At Fossil Spring station, another passenger got on. Brogan was glad of the company. He moved over to make room for the man on the frosty, hard seat.

The newcomer was a short, tight-built man, with a firm brown face full of creases. He had alert little black eyes, and there was something Injun about his mouth, hard and thin, yet not ungenerous. He sank right down in his black shortcoat and tipped his chin onto his chest. The fine snow rattled off his black stovepipe.

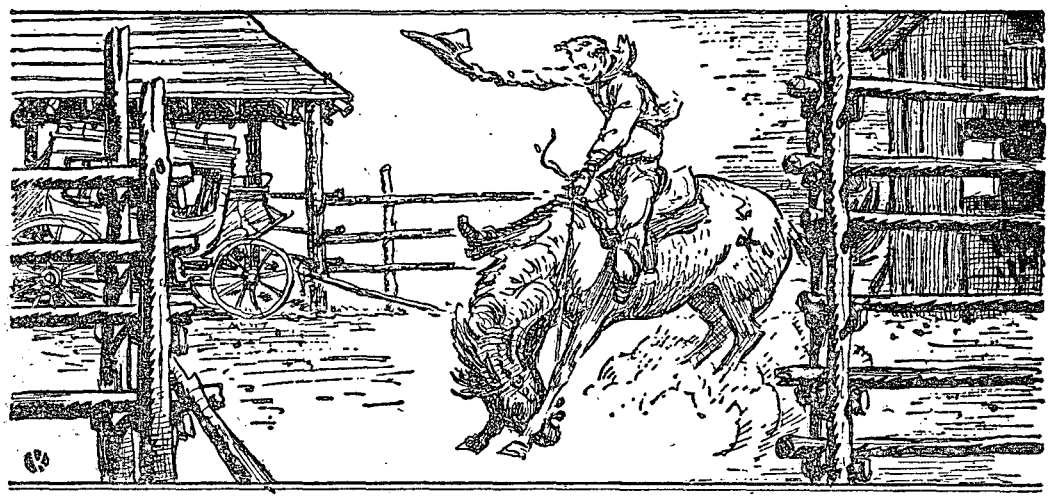
They walloped across a dry creek on squealing leather springs. They were now within a few miles of Canyon City. The snow pulled back into the mountains, leaving white rinds of frost on the gullied red valley. They had bored into the very hip-pockets of the John Day valley, into a little corner half mountain, half prairie.

Wiley thought of a cigar, but knew he'd never get it fired up in this wind. About the same time, his companion roused up with a grunt and dug two cigars from his coat. "Smoke?" he asked.

"Why, thanks." Brogan figured he meant later.

The small man with the hard mouth and the scratch-owl eyes offered his hand. "Harry Skidmore," he said.

"Wiley Brogan." Skidmore's palm was hard as a board, the hand, perhaps, of a business man who had once worked physically.



He struck three matches and lost them all. Impatiently, he said: "Driver, stop this thing."

BROGAN caught his breath. Stop the sun, stop the moon, but never ask a mail driver to stop his coach! All drivers were independent, but this particular one

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was as unsociable as a pint of tobacco juice. Brogan quickly laid a hand on Skidmore's knee and was going to square things somehow when Farrish, the driver, sang out:

"You bet!"

The coach stopped.

Skidmore got his cigar going. Brogan recovered in time to light his own. "All set?" Farrish asked. Skidmore took a prolonged puff.

"Thanks."

The horses hit the collars. The mud-wagon rocked like a baby buggy before settling back into its lurching roll.

masters do pretty good. But you'd think they were all eating the glue off stamps, they way they howdy and civilize me."

There came a pause. Then Skidmore's easy, "What's your line, friend?"

"Horse breaking."

Skidmore's brown eyes faltered an instant, as if he had said he dug graves. "Good enough," he said, without conviction.

Brogan was not unused to the reaction. Between jobs, wearing his gray check suit, black derby, and a clean shirt, he was often taken for a bank clerk, a saloon proprie-

"Whereat you heading?" asked Skidmore.

"Canyon City. End of the line."

"Likewise." Skidmore brought his lips close to Brogan's ear. "Tell you a joke on old Farrish. He'd have thrown me to the lava bears if I'd asked that a year ago! I'm a postal inspector now. I could bust him or this line any time I want." He slapped Wiley's leg and laughed silently.

Wiley understood, now, and laughed with him. Skidmore smoked up half the cigar. The cold seemed to draw them together. The post office man spoke reflectively.

"It's a good job, as jobs go. Up and down, day after day, all across the state from the Cascades east. Checkin' receipts, rubbing the insides of boxes to find dust. Simple as one-two-three. Most of the post-

tor or someone of similarly respected station.

He had a fresh Irish face with a snub, broad nose and cleft chin. A scar showed in the dark bar of his right eyebrow; but the broncs had not succeeded in kicking his teeth out yet, nor in breaking his nose. He had the manner and all the appurtenances of the successful, except success.

THE stage lunged into a winding grade through a wistful grove of poplars still clinging to their summer leaves like an old floosy to a feather boa. "That's terribly hard work for a man with any education," Skidmore grunted.

"That's it," agreed Brogan. "The education."

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The inspector frowned tartly. "Read and write, don't you? That's education."

"Not the kind the business houses pay for, nor the banks and such. Hell," he shrugged, "I'm doing all right. It's a good trade. Maybe I'll buy a livery stable some day. Run it into a stage line. I've got a lot of ideas, if I ever get a stake."

"If it's a good trade, why buy a livery stable?" Skidmore snapped his cigar from him. He seemed right on the point of being mad about something.

This was a tender point with Brogan, a blackhead on his ego fast becoming a boil, because his ambition was a thorn that never stopped devilling him, and he, too, was warming. "If you're too holy to sit by a horsebreaker," he said, "there's other seats in back."

Immediately Skidmore softened. "Excuse me, son," he said. "I was brought up frugal. I hate to see a good saddle wasted on a bad horse, or a good man on a poor job."

They were silent a while, letting the breach close, but Skidmore said finally, "I was doing the same kind of jackass figuring myself at your age. Cutting wood outside Portland. Day wages. But some day I was going to own a wood yard. Like hell I was! I'd still be falling trees and going to own a wood yard, if I hadn't had a jolt."

Brogan drew on the cigar. "What was it?" Did he sound as hound-hungry as he felt? He was bone-tired of breaking horses; his concept of hell was a vast stable full of horses to break, and all of them without a brain. But a father trying to raise wheat on rock, on a rainless prairie, cannot send out sons equipped for much book-work, and Wiley's father had sent him out with a minimum. A little reckoning; penmanship; reading—a whole trunkful of mouldy ppaper-backed classics of his mother's—a buckshot-charge of education fired at a distant target. Not enough to put a boiled collar between him and a horse—just enough to breed an ambition that must feed on itself and end by devouring the man.

"Well, I broke an arm," said Skidmore.

Wiley's face fell. There was no golden key in that.

"I was laid up for two months. I like to starved. I got so hungry I had to think. And what I thought about was how to get out of wood-chopping. I heard about a mail contract open between a couple of camps nobody ever heard of. A jackass could pack it. I bid low and got it. I made less than I did cutting wood. But I was in gov'ment work."

"You still weren't using your head so's you could notice it, were you? A packer."

Skidmore winked. "Between runs, Wiley, between them! I had pretty high expenses

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on that contract. Most of it was for whiskey. Drinks for people. I always did like people, and I just loved them on that job. They loved me, too. Postal inspectors and such. I got other contracts, and then I landed a post-office. Pretty good sized one. When this job opened up, I went after it.

"How do you like that cigar, Wiley?" he asked. "They cost two bits. Have another." He was like a man new to prosperity, still in the oysters-and-champagne stage, but not offensive about it.

UP AHEAD, Brogan could see the houses and mine-stopes of Canyon City. Suddenly a panic seized him; he had an urge to squeeze this little man dry of all the advice he had, to turn him upside-down like a sack and shake him empty of all the tricks he knew. But the stage was almost there; a golden conversation had opened too late.

He just sat there with his eyes hungering, and the buzzard-beak of regret tearing at him. Skidmore laughed softly. "Like taw it's a good trade!" Then he said something revealing; the kind of remark a man made who knew you would find out about him sooner or later, anyway.

"Some of the boys I left behind would tell you Harry Skidmore was a backslapper who hoorawed his way up. Or that I was a plain crook. Or I chested my authority over the ones under me to work their behinds off and get me my promotions. Maybe they're all true. Maybe none of them. I've been too busy to notice. I've gone after the things I wanted, and I've got 'em. They still lay down the carpet for me, and old Bob Farrish stops his stage when I want to light a cigar."

Wiley dropped all these remarks in a mental clasp-purse for examining later. "I've heard it said," he reflected, trying to recall where, "that success was virtue. Or something like that."

Skidmore squinted. He ground down on that remark as if to wring it dry of all its juice. "That's deep," he said. "That's a damn sight deeper than you think! Even a bank robber will be looked up to if he makes a success of it. Look at the James boys! But, by grabs, he'll be a better man for having the money, too. *There's* the deep part. He'll be kinder and pleasanter, and you can bet he'll help his wife with the dishes oftener than if he was scrounging around for a dollar a day."

They were bursting onto the main street, then, with a vista of turn-outs on the gullied road, sprinkled with snow, of lank dogs and horses tailed against the wind at hitch-racks. Tan stone buildings shared the streets with wooden false-fronts and vacant lots. High hills wedged the town into the wide canyon. Distantly, tall blue ridges diked across the southern sky. This was a cattle and mining town, and prosperous, to the first glance.

"Well," said Skidmore, "have I given you anything to chew on?"

"Lots,' Brogan admitted. "But I reckon it will only make me hungrier. I wish—oh, hell," he shrugged.

For an instant Skidmore hesitated, like a man looking the road over before he attempted it.

"Listen. You sober, don't gamble? Can you get me a couple of references? Maybe you'd like a jackass contract or a little P. O. somewhere. I don't know why I give a damn whether you break horses or lick stamps," he added, ruefully. "But you've got more up there than most men running a dry-goods store and getting rich. I can see it, and I can see it's eating you up, too."

Something flagged Wiley off.

"Reckon I'm not the type for licking stamps."

"Okay, let's try it this way—" Skidmore pulled a card from his billfold and write with a pencil under his name. *This will introduce Mr. Wiley Brogan.* "This might help you get a job around the stage stables. I'm down here to let a new mail contract to one of their baling-wire stage outfits. We're opening up some new offices in the mining camps. It might even help some other people. Use it," he said tersely, "and then get rid of it. People get the damndest ideas. And don't let me run into you a year from now unless you're wearing a suit that ain't out at the elbows."

They swung into the stage yard. Brogan slowly tucked the card under the sweatband of his hat. He had a queer, intuitive notion that he must get rid of it the first chance he had.

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The brake-shoes scraped rustily, the horses stood impatiently while hostlers threw off the chains. From the warmth of the depot came two men and a girl. Brogan's eyes passed studyingly over the girl, a dainty, coppery-haired little trick without a straight line in her body. She was with an older man. The other man stood apart from them, staring up at the pair on the deck of the stagecoach. He was tall and narrow as a hall door, a homely man with a heavy, dark mustache.

"There they are!" chuckled Skidmore. "Let a P. O. man open the front door of a county and they know about it at the back. Them are the stage people I'm to see."

He stood up and plunged his hands into the pockets of his coat. Wiley sat there, disconsolately feeling that opportunity had departed his life forever; there was, unhappily, no lock in his life which Skidmore's key would fit.

Skidmore said nasally. "Another thing I hate to see wasted is good advice on a damned fool." He stepped across the rail at the back of the driver's seat and descended to the ground.

II

WHEN Brogan dismounted, the long-shanked man was pumping Harry Skidmore's hand lustily. He had a rich bass voice and used it to dominate the pipings of the older man.

"I've got a couple of antelope steaks spoke for at the hotel, Mr. Skidmore. I'll have your bag sent over. Say, this is real nice, Mr. Skidmore, real nice!"

The other man had a foot between them and was prying into the conversation. He captured Skidmore's hand. "Or how about some Oregon-fried chicken? The missus has the tockwallopin'est feed laid you ever set down to. Mr. Skidmore, meet my daughter, Drusilla."

He played his daughter like an ace, and she was one to take the pot. Small and graceful, with just the right amount of warmth in her eyes as she gave the inspector her hand.

Skidmore bustled right on through them. "Pleased, Miss Pennoyer. Sorry, Thoss. That steak sounds good, Pete—already got plans."

He took his bag from the small collection under the rear boot. Then he turned to fire a direct glance at Wiley. "I'll be around till tomorrow afternoon, son. Meet me here at stage time."

Wiley waved, collected his india-rubber bag and started for the street. As he passed behind the Pennoyers, the girl stepped back. The suitcase banged against her, and Brogan experienced a soft and fragrant collision with her back. It cast her off-balance; he caught her arm and she threw him a glance of surprise.

"I guess there's another way to do that, ain't there?" he said.

"There must be." She smiled. Her lips were smooth and full and her teeth were matched like a five-hundred-dollar string of pearls. Her hair, brushed back and then curled like so many small sausages, was the shade of new copper wire. Standing so close, he could not look her up and down, but he had the feeling everything was in place. She stood about to his nose.

"Are you Mr. Skidmore's assistant?" she asked him.

"Just a friend."

She looked disappointed.

Wiley did not move on; these were, after all, the people he had come to Canyon to see—the small stage operators. It might be that the factor of his friendship with Skidmore would serve as a lever to remove their inertia against hiring help. As yet, the card of introduction had no importance for him.

"By the way," he said, "I'm down here to break horses. Stage stock or pack. That's one of my teams right there. Ask Bob Farrish what he thinks of it."

An ascetic-looking man with pale eyes and a dyed, dead-black soup-strainer mustache, Pennoyer shook his head. His shallow blue eyes were focussed beyond Wiley, if they were focussed at all. They looked like the eyes of a man staring into a fog. Nearly bald, he let his side-hair grow long and whipped it back above his ears.

"I've got more horses than I can use," he said.

"What if you have to expand? Somebody's going to get a mail contract, I hear."

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"We might as well go back," Pennoyer said to his daughter.

She paused to say pleasantly, "I'm afraid there won't be anything. But if there should, where can we find you?"

"I'll be in town a few days. I'll drop around. What company?"

"Oregon Mail."

He caught the other man, who shook his head. "See my super. Jim Shaniko." His mind was away somewhere, too. Not snuffling over its miseries, like Pennoyer's, but baying after a new scent. His dead-black eyes, above the yellowish smudges of slack skin, were indrawn and busy. Brogan sensed that he would be fighting for that contract until the last trick in his bag was exhausted.

TWO days of clattering around on top of a stagecoach in wind and snow and rain had left Wiley foggy-headed and fatigued. He lugged his suitcase up the street to the Western Hotel.

The town lay in a bare valley on Canyon Creek. Marsh slopes, scarred with old placers and sprinkled with juniper, climbed high above the settlement. Volcanic cliffs staked the distant edges of the canyon. Along the street, poplars scattered their yellow leaves in the half-frozen ruts; a mountain ash, laden with orange berries, half-dominated the roadway.

Most of the buildings looked solid, many of them constructed of blocks of yellow volcanic tuff. Back from the main street were winding avenues of unpainted shacks, each shack clutching its clothesline, privy, and shed.

Canyon City pulled a mixed trade. Mining was still the mainstay, but ranchers were edging out into the Indian country, and a few farms lay along the rivers.

Brogan got a cheap room at the Western Hotel. He had found that the cheapest room at a good hotel was generally better than the best room at a cheaper one. This time he was wrong. He landed in a sort of kennel under an outside stairway with a rear door to the backhouse and an inside door on a dim hall. It was furnished with a cot, a graniteware washpan, a wooden bucket of cold water, and a baking powder can full of soft soap made of wood-ash lye and lard. A damp cold came from the walls like fog.

He lay down. Fatigue retreated slowly from his muscles. He found his thoughts swinging back to Harry Skidmore. He got out the golden key the inspector had given him. It was not twenty-four carat gold, maybe not even good plate. It might turn out to be brass, by ordinary ethical standards. But it had opened the door for Skidmore.

Brogan perceived definitely something he had always suspected—that morals were blood brother to economics. Had he met Skidmore at a time when he was flush, he would have considered him a rather shabby character. He would have been offended by the implications of the card of introduction. But tonight he was low enough to realize two things: That if he got just a little broker, he would pass the card as readily as he would a sawbuck. And that he was nearing a fork in his life.

Skidmore had put the curse on his dreams of owning a livery stable. He was a completely cynical man. What the little post-office inspector had got across was that unless he made some radical change in his life he would never be more than a common bronc-stomper. In a few more years, ambition would become a crackling cinder. The habit of deference would incline him more to tipping his hat than to settling it over his eye. But he balked at the motion of using the card. He did not like to look too closely at Skidmore's formula for success in government work. There was a whang of shadiness about it, a hint of winks and nudges, and appointments over the heads of worthier candidates.

He decided to forget about Harry Skidmore and concentrate on that stable he was going to own some day.

But the last thing he thought about was the girl he had bumped into at the stage station. A thought stole back over the rubble of worn-out important thinking which had displaced it at the time.

She backed into me a-purpose! Why? To meet a friend of Harry Skidmore's! To get a toe-hold on that mail contract. But that seemed to lap over into his heavyweight speculations about integrity again, and he shied away from it. Instead, he

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thought of her hair, and the provocative turn of her lips, and the figure he had not been able to look over to his satisfaction.

III

IN mid-afternoon, when he had finished sleeping, he went out and poked around town, critical as a horse-trader. You could tell a lot about towns by small things. The way the men dressed their women, for instance. You'd know by that if they'd pay to have a horse broke. Shabby-dresses and scuffed shoes meant they probably knocked their own horses in the head with a singletree, tied a sack of grain in the saddle, and figured they were broke when they quit pitching.

Contrariwise, a livery stable where the manure was shovelled out before it got hock-deep meant the citizens were considerate of their animals. All these phenomena hauled back to money. Canyon City was well-dowered with mines, farms and ranches, and there were the mountain mining camps, fifteen to fifty miles distant. Wiley's personal well-being revolved about the stage companies feeding these remote camps. There was a pack-train outfit supplying the camps beyond the roads, an express company, and there were the two stage lines.

He hiked first down to Pete LeeMaster's Mountain Stage Line corrals. LeeMaster was the dour, coffin-jawed man who had told him to look up Jim Shaniko. At a livery stable, he learned a lot about LeeMaster without learning anything for sure. "Sure, Pete's all right," a man forking hay told him. And then he explained that LeeMaster was all right except—except that he worked his men an hour longer than anybody else. Except that he pounded the seed-heads out of the hay he bought to feed his own stock and gave the straw to animals he boarded. He was really a generous man, unless you were trying to make a living out of doing business with him.

Brogan was feeling good after his sleep, and took a whiskey to put the final edge on his gusto. Then he went down and asked for Jim Shaniko. A workman told him he was out back somewhere.

Wiley found him standing by a dusty Concord stage with another man. You couldn't tell which was Shaniko, but you could tell which was not. The man in overalls, who listened while the other talked, was not Shaniko. Shaniko was a tremendous man with a chest deep as a vinegar barrel. He wore a striped jersey with long sleeves, and trousers held up by suspenders from which the elastic had gone, so that the waistband was about where the hip-pockets should have been. He was talking earnestly and gesturing with a hand which held a cigar; the other hand, rammed into his pocket, jingled coins.

"I don't see why you've always got to make a major job out of something piddling," he was complaining. "I used to keep all the wagons in this outfit running single-handed, before LeeMaster doubled his crew and his grief, and I can tell you I didn't have a junk-pile full of first-class machinery like you have. You could dust off half of that corruption out back, throw a little paint at it, and sell it for new. Now, why have we got to install new thoroughbraces in this thing instead of taking up on the old ones?"

"Because I've took up on them so many times they ain't got any more snap than them suspenders you're wearin', Mr. Shaniko. I can take up on them again, but what happens? The coach hits a pothole and the reaches come down on the axles like the Devil splittin' kindling. And they don't come back up. They lay there a-jouncin' and a-shakin' all the glue loose, and pretty soon we're buying a new coach instead of a new set of braces."

Shaniko spat and walked around to take a better look at the dusty leather springs, muttering to himself, and gave a wheel a kick. Wiley could see his face. It was red, as he had known it would be from the back of neck. He had a mouth like a black bass, thin blond brows, and shallow blue eyes. His hair was parted in the middle and ostentatiously brought aside in twin bartenders' curls.

The workman was not unskillful at handling employers. "I'll tell you what I think," he said, darkly. "It's them infernal freight wagons. They're kicking hell out of that road; but do you think they'd ever get out and fill a hole? Not if they lost

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their load six days a week in it! They're ruining the road, and *we* pay for it!"

"That's about the size of it," the superintendent agreed. "Well, if you've got to, you've got to. But hold these repairs down. I'd hate to have to can you over a set of carriage lamps."

HE SAW Brogan, then. Brogan was half a mind to turn around and go back. This was a scrounging outfit, and no mistake. But Shaniko was coming over to growl at him. He stood about four inches taller than Wiley, a big man a little gone to fat but still hard.

"LeeMaster told me to look you up," Brogan said. "I'm a horse breaker."

"He told me you'd hit him. I've got enough horses around here to outfit a cavalry troop. How much do you work for?"

"Ten dollars a head. That's fully trained. No foolishness about any horse I break."

Shaniko looked at though he had been hit in the face with a wet fish. "Ten dollars! I can get Siwash Indians over yonder across the hills to break for three."

"You'd better do it, then," Wiley said curtly. He gave him the barest nod and started back, but waited when Shaniko said, staring after him:

"What's your experience?"

"What's the difference? You can't afford me anyway."

The corral boss frowned over this, trying to decide whether he was offended. "I can tell you right now, brother, you won't get ten in this town. If you want to work for eight, I'll take it up with the boss."

Wiley said, "I'd get a tin bill and pick manure with the birds before I'd train a horse for eight dollars. So long."

Jim Shaniko was sure now; he was angry. He threw away his cigar. The hand in his pocket ceased jingling coins. "Maybe you'd better get started right now. We've got plenty of it right here. Maybe I'll help you start."

Wiley laughed in his face. When a big man angered this easily, it showed he was less sure of himself than he should have been. "I wouldn't be selfish," he said. "You can be my guest."

What Shaniko meant to do was not clear, but at that moment the cold breeze brought the bronze cry of a stage horn. A Concord stagecoach behind six horses brawled into the yard. Up on the box, the driver was geeing and hawing and muling away on the lines as though he were managing a gang-plow.

"Whoa, Sam! *Dad*-blame you, Belle! Haw it over!"

The horses were lathered from bit to breeching. They responded to the driver's hands the way a bull reacted to the buzzing of a fly. They wrestled around until they were ready to stop; then the hostlers jumped on them as though they might decide to turn around and run back up to Garnet all of a sudden. Brogan's eyes picked at the roman-nosed bay on the off-leader's tree. There was a jade who wouldn't have made wheeler on any of his teams.

Shaniko said ominously, "I'll see *you* later, fella." He hurried to receive the express box and way-bill and welcome the passengers with chesty cordiality. Pete LeeMaster came from the office and began snooping about the coach as though he expected a wheel to have been stolen.

THE passengers were crippling out, stretching in the yard before they claimed their baggage. They looked as if they had been dragged across the lava bed in a gunny sack. A poor team could do that, just as a poor road could. A poor team instinctively knew where to find the broadest and deepest chuck-holes. Shaniko and LeeMaster stood together studying the way-bill. Brogan had seen all he wanted of this cheap-jack outfit; he started out, but as he passed Pete LeeMaster's eyes came up and pinched with slow recollection.

"Wait a minute!" he said. Something surprising happened to his face; it became cordial. He handed the papers to Shaniko and got between Brogan and the gate to take his hand and clap him on the other shoulder. "What happened to you? I looked around for you after you left but nobody'd ever heard of you."

Wiley said he's probably been asleep in his suite at the Western Hotel. "I generally check in and then wait for the offers.

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I had one for eight dollars, just now. I guess I'm still a little green."

LeeMaster laughed, that rich mahogany voice of his keyed down around his belt-buckle. "Jim would offer you a dollar and six-bits, if he thought you looked like you'd take it."

"Do I look like eight dollars?" Wiley asked.

Shaniko's mouth opened with some sour witticism, but he saw that LeeMaster was laughing with Brogan just now and contained it. "As a matter of fact," LeeMaster admitted, "I may be having a lot of horses broke before long. If a certain piece of business goes through."

The stagecoach had been rolled into the barn, where men attacked it with buckets and slop rags. Wiley observed the cautious manner of the hostlers unharnessing the team in the big corral. "I can see six horses that need breaking, right now," he said.

LeeMaster smiled. "They get the wagons through." He found cigars, snipped the ends with a gold cigar cutter, and struck a match for Wiley. It seemed to Wiley that he was being cigared all over the lot today. "I was thinking, after I saw you with Harry this morning, that I'd get my bid in before you got tied up with someone else."

Shaniko could not watch. He turned his back.

"Harry?"

"Harry Skidmore."

"Oh, yeah,. Well, I'm still available. Eleven dollars a head, with a minimum of twelve horses."

The corral boss turned. "Eleven! Damn it—Pete—!"

LeeMaster arched an eye at him. "We can dicker over it later." He turned the cigar between his fingers and glanced at Wiley. "Know Harry pretty well?"

"Never met him before today."

Cordiality began to ease out of LeeMaster's face, like a friendly hound with dirty feet being cuffed back. "But I heard him tell you to see him off tomorrow—"

"Why not? We got to talking. He wanted to finish it up, I guess. I'd never seen him before today."

He knew what was wrong with the stage man, had known all along. He had taken him for a door-mat to wipe his boots on before he went in to submit his bid. A little favor done for a friend of somebody who had big favors to pass out. Skidmore's strategy was in operation.

"Eleven dollars isn't what I like to get," he said, "but maybe it's the best this town can offer. I'll start tomorrow on that team that just came in."

LeeMaster frowned at the tip of his cigar. "I'll let you know if I need you."

Into Wiley Brogan's head came the picture of a small, rectangular card on which was written: *This will introduce Mr. Wiley Brogan.* A golden communion wafer to make him and Pete LeeMaster friends in the spirit. And because LeeMaster could even make him think of something dishonest, he wanted to take him by the shirt and smash him in the face.

He dropped the cigar in the dust and gave it a boost with the toe of his boot to roll it away from him.

"If you only knew it," he said, "you haven't got a horse in your corral fit to pull a Concord! Why, that team over there—"

Jim Shaniko saw that he had been released from his vow of silence. He took a deep breath and hitched up his slack-suspendered pants three inches. "You can start work tonight at Big Annie's as far as we're concerned."

Wiley regarded him with gentle contempt. "Lemme show you something about that team of yours they just brought in. Why it ain't safe on a mountain grade! I'll bet you a brass bed-pan the bay boogers—"

He ducked under the corral bars and advanced on the team, still under collars. Shaniko yelled, "Keep away from that team, you fool!"

Wiley went on, not slowing, not hurrying, walking straight up to the roman-nosed bay leader he had taken a dislike to. The mare shied and began toe-dancing. He raised his hand to pat her on the neck and she threw over against the near leader, rearing. Shaniko was roaring like a bull elk.

One of the handlers came toward Wiley; he waved him off. He made a pass at the horse with his derby, casually, as a passenger might remove his hat as he stood by the road on a warm day. The mare lunged

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back into the breeching and the swing horse behind her started to sashay about. In a moment the whole team was backing and kicking out at each other.

Wiley turned away, grinning. Shaniko had come on the run. "That's no team, brother. That's a horse-herd. There's only one way to straighten out a horse like that bay mare. Shoot a gun off in her ear; take off an inch of the tip. She'll lose a lot of foolish notion. If I had my Colt—"

The superintendent was tomato-red. He stood close to Wiley, six-feet-four and smelling of sweat, his face turgid with anger. "Get out of here!"

"What are you going to do? Shoot me full of hard bullets?"

Shaniko grabbed him by the shoulder and hauled him back to the gate. He was in mid-stride when Wiley's fist came around from the side, smoking hot, and landed in the middle of his face. It made a splattering sound and the corral boss stumbled back with a bellow like an injured elk. He covered half his face with his hand for a moment, closing his eyes; then pulled his hand down and looked for Wiley. He said a word that had touched off the demolition of many a saloon. He lunged back, enormously strong and monstrously angry.

WILEY lacked an inch of six feet. He did not weigh over a hundred and seventy. All he had was a conviction that he could lick any man he had to, if he stayed with it long enough. That didn't make the corral boss any smaller, but it made Wiley larger. He came in as though to swap punches with the big man, but ducked the first swing, let the second bruise his shoulder, and then slammed him on the ear cith a good roundhouse blow and stepped aside. Shaniko made a grimace and pivoted. He shot a long, reaching blow that caught Wiley on the cheek-bone. It was unbelievable. The man had a reach like a pine-tree.

Wiley felt blood oozing from the split skin. He was pedalling around groggily and Shaniko was crowding him, slinging punches from both sides. He caught one on his forearm and it felt as though it were broken. But when the corral boss stepped in to grapple, he clipped him on the chin with his elbow. Then he rammed an uppercut, but Shaniko clubbed it aside and slugged him on the side of the head. Wiley rolled away from him staggered. Shaniko was momentarily too punchy to finish it up, or the fight would have been over.

The horses were caving around wildly, fighting the handlers. LeeMaster stood by the gate impassively viewing the battle. Wiley was wondering why he had started this, but he knew the answer. He needed a scrap right now to remind himself he was as tough as they come. He couldn't prove it by the contents of his poke. Shaniko had made himself a logical candidate.

Shaniko quartered in. He felt for Wiley's head with a couple of long stabs of his left arm. Brogan swung and missed him a foot. Then Shaniko snapped into it: He smashed out with that murderous right hand of his. It connected, grazzingly but with stunning power. Wiley went down.

He knew he could not stand up to it much longer, and he had the feeling that Jim Shaniko could keep right on giving better than he took for some time. Shaniko looked as though he knew it, too; he was feeling better about things. The big man reached down to haul Wiley up for the snapper. Wiley grabbed his arm, tilted his head and let Shaniko's face collide with it as he came down. There was a pained grunt. Brogan lurched to his knees and began to slam blows into Shaniko as though this were the last fight he would ever be in and he must unload all his Sunday punches at once. He caught Shaniko by surprise. His eyebrow was cut and bleeding, his mouth was smashed but the blows kept piling in savagely.

Wiley got to his feet, making feinting motions at the corral boss as he started to lumber up. Shaniko was so foggy that all he knew was to get up and wade in for more. Wiley ripped loose. He hit Shaniko on the point of the chin with a long upswing clout. Then he watched the huge shoulders cave and the long arms reach toward the ground, and saw Shaniko, his face still resisting the proposition that he was whipped, fall to his knees and lunge forward against the earth.

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IV

LEEMASTER had taken the whole thing impersonally. Standing with some other men at the gate, he watched Wiley leave the corral. Spiritually, Wiley felt cleaned out; physically, he was about to collapse.

"First time that's ever happened to Jim," LeeMaster said. "Look out, Brogan."

"Why don't you fire that big clown and get your self a good corral boss?" Brogan asked. "I know horses, and I've got some ideas about how to run a stage line to make a profit."

"Everybody," said LeeMaster, "has an idea about how to run somebody else's business." He left the group and went inside.

Pride kept Wiley on his feet until he reached a vacant lot. Here he stepped off the boardwalk, planted his back against a wall, and slid down. For about five minutes he was cold-sick. A man leaned over him and said, "All right, fella?"

"I'll make it. Where's a barber shop?"

"Next to the hotel. I'll give you a hand."

"Never mind."

After a while he moved on up the street toward the barber shop, advancing with the grave and uncertain progress of a drunk. The barber, a mustachioed little man who looked like a German band-master, worked on him for an hour. He reduced the swelling under his eye and pulled the cuts together with plaster, pickled his skinned knuckles in alum water and tried to sell him a hair singe and tonic. Wiley resisted the flourishes, but paid another quarter to have his clothes brushed.

He went out. A wind was darting up the street. The day was ending in melancholy grays and a dishwater sky. There was more snow in the sagging belly of the grey clouds massing over the town. He had a steak at a small cafe, and this, and three cups of coffee, did much to iron out the kinks. But all through it that key of Skidmore's kept rattling about a lock just too small to admit it. Now, why? he thought. *Why didn't I use the card?* A lot of preachers wouldn't have thought twice about using it. It was the way business was run. You did something for a friend, the friend did something for you.

But the matter of a federal mail contract made it just a little more serious than that.

WHEN he felt like it, he hiked up the road to the barn which was headquarters of the pack-train outfit. He was self-conscious about his battered face, but the barber had done a masterful job: People hardly grinned at him. It developed that the packer broke his own stock. Wiley went on to the freight depot and asked around. They were pretty well fixed up, too. He wondered about the mines. No use, they told him. They used mules, and mules just didn't wear out.

He walked back to town. It was cold and he missed his hat, which he had left at LeeMaster's. He felt singularly annoyed with God, or somebody. He was doing his gad-blamedest to stay honest, but they were not doing their part. He had recited to Skidmore the saying about success being virtue. Now he recollected another proverb about that sterling quality. That virtue was its own reward. There was sour humor in it.

He was sauntering down the road, chewing on his dislike for Shaniko's big face and bass-like mouth when he saw the Pennoyer girl walking ahead of him. She was moving along with pert strides that advanced her nearly as fast as Wiley's saunter. There was a vitality about the girl that aroused him. He amused himself by watching the brisk sway of the long skirt flowing down her hips, gay as a schoolgirl's chatter. He stepped up his walk and moved in beside her. She gave him that swift blue-eyed glance.

"Well, hello!" he said "This is a surprise. I just happened to be running down the street full tilt and danged if I didn't run into you!"

"Isn't it wonderful, how things happen?" she said. She had an unflinching way of looking at a man. Nothing coy about her. Her face was swift and alert, delicately cast but far from having any Dresden-doll look about it. She was taking his measure as frankly as he took hers, not brazenly, but reading all she could about him in his face.

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The first thing she saw was that it had lost some hide and gained some bruises in the last few hours.

"I said to myself when I saw you," she said, " 'He's a brawler,' Who was it?"

Wiley sadly shook his head. 'Ah, it's a rough trade! I was in a stall with these three horses when a mule walked in. You never saw such a brawl! I was lucky to come out alive."

"It's the people in a trade who make it rough."

"Speaking of that," Wiley said, "have you managed to gouge LeeMaster's eye out yet? In the way of getting the contract away from him?"

"There are some details to be worked out. Mr. Skidmore's name on the paper, for one."

"I've been wondering," he said, "who ate Skidmore's Oregon-fried chicken?"

"The Pennoyers. We didn't really expect him to eat with us. But we knew LeeMaster was out to grab him and we certainly weren't going to sit back."

"You mean you weren't."—"Am I wrong about something?" Wiley mused. "I get the notion that Miss Drusilla is the shove in that outfit."

SHE smiled and modestly kept her eyes on the walk. "I keep books for Father, that's all. But I'm going to land that contract some how, if I have to give Skidmore dope and guide his hand on the paper. I've been wondering something, too. Would you be interested in breaking horses for fifteen dollars a head?"

Wiley closed his eyes. "For twelve dollars," he said, "I teach the horse to say 'Excuse me' when he belches. For fifteen I train him to eat with a knife and fork, salute the flag, and blow the horn when approaching a station. I'm so interested in busting broncs for fifteen dollars," he said, "that you'll have to excuse me while I dash away a few tears."

She reached over and patted his arm. "My poor man," she said, "you've had a hard time, haven't you? I thought that was lace at your wrists, but now I see it's your cuffs. Wiley, you're a fool—nobody but a f o o l would break horses anyway—but you're a likeable fool and I want you to work for us—after we're packing the mail."

Brogan had the impression that he had been in this conversation before. LeeMaster, however, had been a little more direct about it. Perhaps she did not see the real motive behind her interest in him, the hope that Harry Skidmore would hear that she had given a friend of his a job and his heart would be warmed toward her.

He was not exactly shocked, but he faltered over answering. The girl, suddenly noting his silence and glancing at him, said with a catch of her breath:

"Wiley, for heaven's sake! What did you think I meant?"

"I thought you might like me to deliver that contract in person."

She stopped, annoyed and angry. "If you think I was trying to bribe you—."

Her color was fine when she was angry, paling her cheeks a trifle but darkening her eyes and lips. Her reaction was reassuring and enhancingly feminine; she hadn't known herself what was in her mind.

"I've been philosophizing too much," he said. "I'm close to thirty years old, Drusilla, and all I know is horses. I know they're a dang poor living, and I'd like to get out of it. Maybe I just *wish* somebody would bribe me."

"If somebody does," she said, "it won't be me." She started at him a while, studying over it, looking deeply into him and perhaps seeing as much of him as he had seen of her. She said, "You can call me Dru, since you won't be an employe of mine. Why don't you get out of it, if you don't like it? If a person really wants something, he ought to be able to manage it. I haven't any patience with people who are always 'wanting' to do things, but never find the time to do them. Dad wanted to get out of being a timekeeper in an iron foundry, and he just naturally made up his mind and did it."

"How long did it take him?"

She hesitated; then laughed. "Thirty years. But he did it! He is a transportation man, now—an honest to heaven transportation man!"

"How is he making out?"

"You've got a mind like an auditor. It's

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none of your business how we're making out. We're in business, aren't we?"

She was as capricious as mountain weather. "What I was thinking," he said, "was that whoever gets to pack the mail is going to be the only one left in business in a year's time. I hear they pay about a hundred and fifty dollars a mile for a corner of the boot to throw their mail bags in. You could cut rates on LeeMaster till he couldn't afford to ride his own stages. Or he could cut them on you."

They were before the lava-brick office of the Oregon Mail Company; an optimistic title, thought Brogan. She turned to stand in the doorway facing the street. "It would be the only trick he hasn't used against us," she said. "He's cornered all the grain in town and half-starved us, crowded our coaches into the bank and tried to buy up our notes to put the squeeze on us. But rates are already so low a person would be cutting his own throat if he lowered them any more without a subsidy of some kind."

"Well, I hope you swing it," he said. "And I hope LeeMaster's horses all come down with the swinney. But not if I'm working for him. Can I still call you Dru if I do?"

"You'll call me Miss Pennoyer—but I probably won't answer." She said it severely, but her eyes laughed. She turned and was swallowed by the gloom of the office.

Leaving her, he felt good. He felt as though he had just been sliding down a rainbow, or holding hands with springtime. Everything he looked at had a soap-bubble shimmer. The whole interview was colored with an irrational charm. Realizing it was totally illogical did not lessen the magic of it; she was pretty, and the world was fair, and he was Wiley Brogan, success, instead of Wiley Brogan, failure.

She liked him. Would she give him her nickname to carry, like a lock of hair, if she did not? She was frank about her feelings, so frank that it was like walking through light and shadow to be with her. But she was not quite frank with herself, if she did not know there was design in her offer to him.

Feminine as she was, a little hairspring of merchandising vibrated inside her. No doubt there were some hard times and floursack underwear in her background, which tended to rise up and shoo her along any time she felt them getting too close.

He tried to take a little corner of the rainbow back into the hotel room with him, but failed. He had to check it at the desk, as he checked his key when he went out, and he knew that when he went back for it later there would be nothing left of it but a damp little puddle in his heart.

V

BROGAN'S descent to sin occurred, fittingly, in the dingy hotel room. He had removed his boots, trousers and shirt and crawled into the blankets. They smelled of perspiration and dampness. There were cracks in the plank walls through which he could have shoved a saddle-blanket. Wind hissed through them and he heard the fingers of the snow secretly trying the walls. He slept for a while but was wakened by slots of light and low voices from the next room. A young couple were talking, the girl apparently consoling the man over something.

It depressed him. Only a woman could do that for a man—heal his splintered ego so that in the morning he could go out, and come back to her that night a little more than before. It bore upon him with the suffocating finality of a cave-in that it was all wrong—that any way you could fight your way out of it was legitimate. Success, by God, *was* virtue! Was there any particular virtue in failure?

This was when he knew when he was going to use the card; it was when he realized that he had left it under the sweatband of his hat, which he had left in the Mountain Stage Line corral. He reared up in bed, intending to go after it. He was as hot to use it, now, as he had been not to use it before. But he sank back, reflecting that if it were lost, he could replace it when he saw Skidmore.

With all his soul-searching behind him, he felt better than he had in years. Born to hang, perhaps. At any rate, he slept,

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and knew the stories about criminals sitting on the edge of their beds with their faces in their hands was unadulterated hokum.

HE SLEPT late, rising at ten to wash his face in icy water and don his other clean shirt. In the soapy steel mirror, he examined his battle scars. He ran a comb industriously through his stiff, dark hair, without taming it much. Then, in his gray suit, a cigar in his mouth, he inspected himself again, and grinned.

Brogan, he thought, you're a hell of a boy. As a stage man you'll knock 'em over.

He had no intention of going after a job breaking horses. If he had to sin, it was going to be a blue-chip sin. He was going to be manager, vice-president, or some damned thing. When he said frog, people were going to jump. Wiley Brogan was going to test out some of these theories of his.

The desk clerk had been watching for him. "Mr. Brogan!"

"I'm not checking out for a couple of days. I'll pay later."

The clerk was a pot-bellied little man wearing a sweater coat and tight trousers. "This ain't about your bill. Ain't you the fellow that had a mill with Jim Shaniko?"

"Do you have to ask that?"

"Have you got a gun?"

"Why?"

"Shaniko has, and he's wearing it. He's never been licked before. He ain't the type to eat a lickin'. He was drunk last night and looking all over town for you. I'd wear a gun, if I was you, if only to call his bluff. Keep out of his way a couple of days and he'll simmer down."

Wiley considered. "The way I handle a gun, I'd be safer without one. Shaniko's a lot of wind, anyway."

But while he ate breakfast at a counter next to the bank, he pondered how to go back for his hat without running afoul of Shaniko, perhaps still half-drunk. He was sitting here, drinking a last cup of coffee and staring into the street, where horses and wagons were grinding into mud the four inches of snow which had fallen during the night, when he saw Pete LeeMaster walk by with a bank-book in his hand, studying over it. LeeMaster suddenly glanced around and saw him. He came inside.

He sat down by him, winked at the waitress and raised one finger, which meant he wanted coffee. While she poured it from a blue enamel coffee pot encysted in soot, he looked Wiley over.

"You don't look so bad. You ought to see Jim. See him first, though, if you do."

"I hear he's going to saw me into stove wood."

LeeMaster looked uneasy. "I'm going to have to let Jim go. He can't get along with anybody. Not even me."

"As easy as you are to get along with?"

"I'm not so hard. Only if you're trying to run a whizzer on me. These Pennoyers. They think I'm the original ring-tailed roarer, just because I don't laugh when they corner all the grain in sight."

"I heard you cornered it on them."

"*This* year. Last year it was them. They had me feeding my stock so much bran I was afraid they'd begin giving milk. Don't sell that girl short! Don't sell any woman short, in business. They figure anything's fair they don't get caught at. When they hew to a line at all, half of it comes away on the axe."

"Maybe so. But she offered me fifteen a head to break stock for her."

When LeeMaster smiled, his teeth were white and even under the thick, square-cut mustache. "Was that after you showed her the card?"

Brogan's instinctive reaction was to glance up to see if the waitress had heard. She had not. Neither had the only other customer, at the far end of the counter.

"Why don't you come down to the office?" LeeMaster suggested. "The stage for The Dalles leaves in a couple of hours. We can have a talk before you go over."

"Sure," Wiley said.

On the way up, the stage man explained that he had sent Shaniko out that morning to bid on some rye hay that was advertised up near John Day. They went through the cold, untidy waiting room into the rear office. It was small and musty with bare walls and a flowered cotton carpet. Beside a roll-top desk stood a revolving

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book-case and a waste-basket of woven reeds. There was a calendar on the wall above the desk and an ambrotype of a bearded man with a horse-trader look about him.

LeeMaster sat in the swivel chair and with his toe moved a cuspidor between them. He opened a box of cigars. "What I want to know," he said, "is why you didn't show me that thing yesterday?"

"I thought I'd try to sell myself, first. If that didn't pan out, I knew I could sell Skidmore."

"How much do you think you ought to have out of this?"

"You mean how much per head?"

"That, or a flat rate."

"A flat rate would be a bribe. I want a job. If I've got to get it this way, I suppose I've got to. But it won't be per head, either, because I'm all done breaking horses."

LeeMaster's eyes got that curtained look again. "Then what are we talking about?"

"A position. I've been in this game a long time. Even the boys who shovel out the manure get some ideas about how a stage business ought to be run in fifteen years. I'm practically foundering on ideas."

"What do you want to be? My pardner? LeeMaster's face was austerely amused.

"Not exactly. I want to manage the outfit for you. I'll take twenty-five percent of the gross."

"Why, you damned fool!"

WILEY wagged his cigar. "Pardners," he said, "shouldn't talk that way to each other."

"Twenty-five percent of the *gross*! Why, good God! What do you think I'm making here—a million dollars a year? Twenty-five percent of the gross is about all I make."

"Don't break down," Brogan said. "If I'm not worth it, don't pay it. But if I am, I'll take a contract that will last as long as the mail contract. Probably four years. We'll adjust at the end of that time. But you'll be the only one in business by then, and we'll both be making so much money we probably won't want to upset the apple-cart by making any changes."

LEE MASTER got up and toured the office. He appeared to be utterly confounded. "Twenty-five *percent*! Brogan, you must be crazy. What are you? A horse-breaker. All right, that's good, honest work, but what do you know about managing a stage line?"

Brogan got up. He dropped the cigar in the spittoon. "I know Harry Skidmore," he said. "If I still can't sell myself, I can always fall back on him." He glanced about and found his hat on the prong of an antelope head on the wall. He took it and blew off the dust. "Well, you think it over. I'm going on up to the Pennoyers' and talk to them."

LeeMaster impatiently waved his hand at him. "Sit down, sit down! We can work this out, but not in five minutes."

Wiley was staring into the greasy, silk-lined bowl of his derby. "Where's the card?"

Lee Master impatiently waived his hand where. Look," he said, "what about ten percent of the net?"

"What about giving me that card? I didn't expect to be able to do business with you anyway. Even at twenty-five percent of the gross, you'd be killing yourself to figure out ways to make the gross run smaller than the net. Where's the card?"

Pete LeeMaster drew on the cigar. His face was both apprehensive and stubborn. "I misput it."

Wiley started across the room. "That card," he said, "leaves when I do. You cheap scrouger!"

LeeMaster pulled back the square skirts of his coat as if to hook his thumbs over the snakeskin belt. The left thumb did find the belt, but his right hand drew a bone-handled Colt from the holster at his hip. It was a heavy-caliber Bisley with the bluing worn off the highlights and no front leaf at all. LeeMaster shifted his cigar around in his mouth and handled the gun with no show of excitement.

"Some day," he said, "that pepper-pot you call a brain is going to get you in trouble. Sit down. Let's hash this over. I don't know exactly where the card is, but if I ever need it I think I can find it."

"If I went to the Pennoyers, I suppose you'd think you needed it then?"

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"I suppose so."

"What's the matter with that gaboon you call a brain? It's got my name on it, but it hasn't got the Pennoyers', and it's in your possession. People will want to know how-come you to have it."

"It may have the Pennoyers' name on it by then."

Wiley turned and went to the door, angry enough to throw the wall at him if it had not been nailed down. He opened the door and stood there making and unmaking his right fist. "You can do what you want with the damned thing," he said. "But if this ever gets to court, you and I will have our whereases and wherefores out behind the courthouse. You wouldn't look so big without that cannon. You'd look just about right to fit under a cow-chip."

LeeMaster laughed at his fury, but the last thing he said had more significance than all the other declarations put together.

"There's no way I can keep you from trying to do business against me, Brogan, but I can do one thing: I can promise you it will be the most profitless work you ever got into."

VI

WILEY had been cautious too long, and he was too angry with LeeMaster to be bluffed out this early. He went first to the saloon, had a shot, and slogged on up the hill to the Oregon Mail company. Some passengers were waiting on benches in the yard for the afternoon stage to Garnet. Inside, in an office too prim, too tricked out with things like clean pen-wipers to be thoroughly masculine, he found the Pennoyers, Thoss D. and Drusilla. Near a small post-office cage with one wicket, Drusilla sat on a high stool, making small figures in a ledger. She wore paper cuffs and a starched white blouse and dark skirt.

Pennoyer was tilted back in his chair, stabbing a sharp letter opener at his desk. His wispy Robert Louis Stevenson-patterned mustache looked as dark as serge, but his hair was frankly white. He glanced up at Brogan and said nothing. Dru smiled curiously and swung to face him.

"All right if I close the door?" Brogan asked.

"I wouldn't blame you. Shaniko's on the warpath."

"This isn't for Shaniko."

Women have an insight that makes the average man appear to be wearing mental smoked glasses. They can smell intrigue two counties away. So it was no surprise to Wiley to see small, blue glints of light appear in Dru's eyes. She knew what was coming and he felt she already knew how it was going to work out.

"If I had time, I'd be clever about this," he said. "But Skidmore leaves in forty-five minutes, and I've got to be down at the depot. I had a card from him that said, 'This will introduce Mr. Wiley Brogan.' He told me it would get me a job. He also told me to burn it after I got my job."

Pennoyer's stiff features refused to react.

"Where is it now?" Dru asked quickly.

"It was in my hat. I lost it in LeeMaster's corral during the fight. He's got the card, now."

She shook her head slowly.

"So this is all kind of chancy," he said. "A card like that doesn't prove a thing. I just want you to know about it before we go any farther. Shall we?"

Drusilla clasped her hands. "I know," she said. "You've come to deliver the contract in person."

"I'll try, if you want me to." He looked over at Thoss Pennoyer. The old man had not moved yet, but he had pulled his pallid brows together in thought. Wiley stepped over and gripped his hand. "Mr. Pennoyer, I'm glad to know you."

"We—we've met." Pennoyer straightened up.

"Not exactly. I asked for a job, and you turned me down. Before I go on, I want to be sure we're acquainted. I want to say that you've got a mighty fine daughter, and the raw materials of a fair stage line. I couldn't improve much on the daughter, but I could do wonders for this fleet of mud wagons. If I did, naturally I'd want to be paid for it."

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Pennoyer knew the answer to that. His face sharpened. "How much?"

"A third of the net. That may sound pretty rough, but it doesn't mean I own any part of the business. I'll be your manager. I share in the profits while the contract is in effect."

"This," Dru said thoughtfully, "sounds like bribery."

"Then don't have anything to do with it. The way I look at it, either you or LeeMaster is going to carry the mail. The other one won't be in business a year from now. I know LeeMaster, and I wouldn't do business with him for a hundred a week. I let him think I would, just to see his face fall when I turned him down. This isn't a bribe; it's a proposal. I'd like to marry the Oregon Mail Company, and I'll bring a fat dowry if I do."

Pennoyer rose. He walked to a rear door, opened it and went into a dim parlor. "Will you both come in?" He sat at a small reed organ; when Wiley entered he was pumping it with a rolling motion of his whole body and tootling a few trial notes to test the pressure.

"I like to clear every move I make in business with the Lord," he said. "We'll sing a hymn or two."

Wiley shivered. "Maybe we'd better leave the Lord out of this, unless there's a lightning rod on the building. When I feel like getting on the right side of Him, I give some old whiskey-fighter four-bits for a shot of booze. It keeps him from robbing some honest citizen."

Pennoyer did not hear. He sang a hymn. Brogan noticed that Dru did not join him. She sat in an antimacassared chair, frowning at her linked fingers. Through a small window, he saw into the old man's pious soul. He perceived that he would grab anything he could, but would kid himself about the morality of it. He was as guilty as Wiley, right now, but he would strive desperately to whitewash it for himself.

He finished, and turned, "Drusilla?"

"Why, we're going to do it, of course. Only a third seems pretty stiff. I think twenty-five percent would be more like it."

"Fine." Brogan rose, feeling no different now that he had put a first lien on his soul. "We won't have anything in writing, just as a precaution. "I'll come to work after we know it's going through. I could be wrong, of course."

"You'll come to work tomorrow. And try not to have any liquor on your breath. I'm not a prude, but I've only met you a few times, now, and I don't think you've failed to have something on your breath every time."

Wiley winked at Pennoyer. "Is she always this hard to get along with?"

Pennoyer for the first time smiled. It changed his whole countenance. There was something ruttish about it, something of the good-humored villainy of a country horse-trader who has just taken his prize quarter-miler out of the shafts of his buggy for a match with a neighborhood plug. "As a rule," he said.

Dru sniffed, and the reddish-gold sausage ringlets danced as she went back into the front office. She climbed onto her high stool. "Now, then, why don't you get down there and give Mr. Skidmore the news? And when you finish that, you might start figuring how you're going to get that card back from LeeMaster."

WHEN the Dalles stage was loaded a short time later, Wiley Brogan was there to shake hands with the overcoated little man who came hustling into the yard at the last moment. The black short-coat was buttoned tightly and he wore the stovepipe at a light-hearted list to starboard.

"How are you, my boy?" he exclaimed. "I was worried that you wouldn't be able to make it."

"Wouldn't have missed it for anything." They gripped hands, and Wiley said quietly, "I'm working with the Pennoyers—Oregon Mail Company. We worked out something pretty nice. A percentage."

"That's good," said Skidmore. "That's fine." He hung back a moment. "I might have known the girl would carry the day. Enjoy her, my boy, enjoy her!" And so saying, with a worldly chuckle, Harry Skidmore ducked into the stage and out of Wiley Brogan's life.

It seemed to call for a drink; for something to dispel the uneasiness which suddenly engulfed him. Since he already had

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liquor on his breath, Wiley discerned no harm in a whiskey. In fact, he saw a lot of possible good in it.

At the Emigrant Bar, he sipped the raw fury of a half-aged whiskey, mulling over the purely philosophical question of who was the greater sinner, the briber or the bribee. Since he was both, it offered him a purely academic interest. The Pennoyers bribed him; he, morally, at least, bribed Skidmore. There was a melancholy satisfaction in being the chief of sinners.

Brogan was a unique drunk, in that when he drank his eardrums thickened so that he heard nothing until it was shouted at him. For some time he was not aware that Jim Shaniko, LeeMaster's thick-witted giant, had entered the saloon. A dull silence had setled down. Brogan did not notice this. But his eyes were still good, and when he glanced up at the mirror behind the bar, with its soaped suggestions to drinkers, he saw the superintendent moving slowly through the tables. He could have been the proprietor, circulating amiably to see how things were going. But he had more the look of a man looking for someone in particular—hesitating once when he saw the back of a man in a keno game. The man wore a gray suit, had thick, dark hair growing low on his neck, and looked not unlike Wiley Brogan.

Shaniko moved along. Brogan's eyes trailed him. He knew that the thing for him to do was to get out. He was unarmed. Shaniko wore a gun on his right hip, butt foremost. Suddenly Wiley wished he could order a drink which would nullify all the whiskeys he had drunk. He wanted all his wits to deal with this, but all he could do was to watch the superintendent's progress through the tables and hold his empty glass between his thumb and forefinger. He stayed there as though the soles of his boots were nailed to the floor.

The men in the saloon must have known about Shaniko and Brogan. They watched Shaniko closely, except when he was watching them. When he paused at a table, no one commented on his battle scars but made a pleasantry about the stage business or invited him to sit down and have a look at a bottle.

Reaching the back of the room, he turned. Brogan's neck-hairs stiffened. Shaniko brought his eyes down the bar without missing a man, like a boy out to hit every picket in a fence with his stick. They reached Brogan, passed on; halted and came back.

He said, "Ah!" Yet he did not hurry as he walked back through the room. Wiley put his back to the bar, hooked his elbows onto the curled lip of it and watched Shaniko come on. Shaniko stopped six feet away. "*Mister* Brogan!"

He was grinning in rapt and evil contemplation of the blunt Irish face before him. Brogan was glad he was drunk, now. It was easier to look at that blurred red face with all its grossness, its pore-like pox-marks and its grayish undercolor, without spitting in it. He decided to go along with it as long as he could.

"*Mister* Shaniko!" he said. "I was told you were out buying rye hay. 'What a mistake,' I told m'self, 'when there's rye whiskey to be bought.' I'm glad to see you've reconsidered. I'm drinking bourbon myself."

Shaniko was drunker than he was. That seemed to give Wiley a slight bulge. He was not sure, though. Shaniko was too far away to tag.

The bartender set out a bottle with a thump. "Here's your bottle, Jim. Will you want a glass, or is this a holiday?"

"This is a holiday." Shaniko reached over to pull his gun, watching for the impact on the other's face. Wiley blinked.

"Jim!" the bartender snapped.

"Turn around," Shaniko said.

"Haven't you the guts to do it looking a man in the eye?" Wiley asked him. Brave words, for a man whose knees rattled.

"I've got the guts to do it any way I want. Have you the guts to take it?"

"If I was sure what you were going to do."

"Why don't you turn around and find out?"

"Turn around, mister," the bartender advised hastily.

Brogan figured the man must know Shaniko better than he did. He turned around and watched him in the backbar.

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Shaniko sounded like a man steeling himself to something, flexing down to a job he was not sure he could bring off, speaking slowly and without much thought to his words.

"We've got a trick we use on bad horses. Just the worst of 'em. The hard-mouthed hellfries that eat a bit up. It cures some of them, and some it kills. It's kind of like gelding, only you geld them in the head. I learned it from a hoss-breaker named Brogan."

Brogan knew. He had never been closer to sinking to his knees and begging. He could thank the fact that he was partly drunk for having the courage to stand up to it. He said quietly, to the bartender "He'll kill me. He's going to try to shoot off the tip of my ear."

The barkeeper kept both palms flat on the mahogany. "If you shoot, Jim, by God I'll see you hung and I'll buy the rope!"

The hammer of the Colt was back and Shaniko was taking fingerpoint aim, squeezing his forearm against his ribs and looking squarely at the back of Brogan's head. Brogan fell back on horse-training, too, trying a rough Spanish bit.

"You're all I figured you were, Shaniko, yellow and thick-headed. I licked you fairly. I could lick you again. But if you try this, I'll kill you. I'm telling you to put—"

The gun leaped in Shaniko's hand.

VII

THE pain, the roar, the flash, were a three-tongued flame, inseparable. The explosion was a thunder-clap that cut him off from all but the golden, searing pain. Shaniko's face disappeared as the mirror was shattered. Wiley stumbled, felt a man clutching at him but a moment later sensed that he had fallen. Something was fluttering against the back of his head like a bat's wings. He did not understand until after, when he learned that it was someone beating his burning hair with his hat.

He did not feel the pain, then, but he was numb, brain and body. On the theory that a man should remain vertical until proved dead, they stood him up, and had him buckling about with his head rolling, a man grasping each arm. He saw Jim Shaniko standing there with his face stubbornly refusing to confess that he was scared. He was holstering his gun and saying, "He had it coming, by God! He had it coming, the litle whelp! Didn't he, boys?"

Nobody answered him, and he went outside. About this time a man said "My God, look at his ear!"

Brogan passed out.

When he came around, they had moved him up to the Pennoyers' station and carried him into the parlor. The red plush of the sofa pricked through his shirt and he was attempting to scratch when he regained awareness. His ear still rang like a church-bell. His nerves were pulled out to harpsichord-tautness and pain was plucking them. He sat up wildly and put his hand to his ear.

A thick bandage, like an earmuff, covered it. He saw Pennoyer standing sternly by a window, and Dru with a sweet, inconsequential-looking little women who, he supposed, was her mother. The frantic fear in his eyes conveyed the question in his mind. The thought of death alarms the average man less than the loss of any part of him.

Dru knelt beside him. "Just the tip," she said. "Oh, Wiley, Wiley!" She shook her head as though there had never been another like him to drink and to brawl.

"How much of the tip?"

"Only enough to be distinguishing." She had a small, folded paper in her hand and quickly opened it. "The doctor left you in my charge. You'll stay in bed until tomorrow night and take these pills if your ear gets to hurting."

"Give me the pills," Brogan groaned.

The little gray-haired woman, who was like something out of Dickens, came timidly to his side. "Would you like some broth?"

"What do I want with broth?" It was a ridiculous question, but he recollected that she was his hostess and said, no, thanks, no broth. Just give him the pills and let him out of here.

Dru stared. "What for? To do what?"

"To go to bed!" he snarled. "I've got a bed at the hotel."

He got up and reeled into a table and leaned on it with both hands until he had his senses again. He remembered Shaniko.

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"You'll go to bed right here!" Dru was tugging at him.

"I'd scratch myself to death on that thing before morning." He would not argue it; he procured his hat and the pills and went out. They followed to watch him reel across the street to the Western Hotel. In the dank comfort of his room, he rested for a half-hour. It was growing dusk when he came out. The gun on his hip made a large bulge under the tight coat. It was an old Peacemaker he had traded a saddle for. He tramped east out of town until he found a dump among the junipers and sage. A strong, cold wind was blowing. He found a bottle among the offal of the town, set it on a rock, and loaded the gun.

Brogan had never needed to know how to shoot, had little talent for it. He had worked too hard to be off wasting shells on tin cans. He wished now that he had gone in more for those shooting matches they were forever getting up around a stable.

He faced the bottle belligerently at a distance of about fifty feet. He stood the way he had seen gunmen stand, feet set stolidly, arms hanging, head jutting forward a trifle. Then his right hand swept up to the gun. He drew it smoothly but dropped it on the ground. He swore and picked it up. His head pounded when he bent over. Holstering it, he resumed his stance.

The second time he drew, his front leaf caught on the holster. He fought it clear and blazed away. Mud kicked up twenty feet in front of the bottle. The roar set his ear to ringing worse. He blew smoke out of the barrel and holstered the gun. But in sudden lack of spirit he sat down.

"Damn it," he said.

He knew what he wanted to do: Kill Shaniko. Obviously a gun was not the weapon for it. Fists, then. But it would be a matter of many hours before he was in shape, perhaps, and by that time his urge to slay might have cooled.

A strong seam of practicality ran through Brogan. If he killed Shaniko, he knew for a certainty they would hang him, if they could catch him. And he did not yearn to spend his life on the dodge.

He thought of an alternative that did not offend his pride nor his logic. He would wear the gun, and let it be known that he did not generally wear it because he was afraid—of what he might do in a fight. There had been a scrape down in Grass Valley—Shaniko would sweat every time he saw him, but some day Wiley would catch him without his gun and beat the living daylights out of him. He would whip him, put him on a horse, and Jim Shaniko would never come back to Canyon City.

With that settled, his conscience clear, he went back to town.

IN A WEEK there was only a heavy scab along the top of his ear. A scallop like a rear gun-sight notched it. Brogan got used to himself in this form, accepted the fact that some men would feel it necessary to call him Gotch-Ear, and settled down to work.

He heard that all was spit and polish down at LeeMaster's. Shaniko was overhauling the rolling stock, a horse-trainer was on the job, and several wagon-loads of food had gone up to LeeMaster's meal station at Swamp Creek. Something was getting ready to break.

Brogan's career with the Oregon Mail began with the purchase of a box of cigars. Loading the breast pocket of his tight gray coat with a dozen of them the first morning he was able to work, he started his tour of inspection. Pennoyer introduced him to Press Malloy, a shouting, cavalierly old man who acted as his corral boss. He dressed like a miner in red flannel shirt, knitted silk suspenders, and black pants stuffed into knee-length boots. He may have had a miner's knowledge of rocks, but he was a fool around a stage station, Wiley decided.

Yet, having taken orders all his life, he knew how not to give them, and he was slowgoing about how to tell the old man he wasn't worth powder to blow him to hell.

They started in the stage barn. Malloy had a way of cocking his hip, recklessly flinging his leg out to the side, and shaking the ash off his cigar when he had something to say.

"Gennawine Abbot and Downing stagecoaches, Brogan!" he shouted. "The real Concord! Treat' em rough; they love it. Ain't had to lay a varnish brush to ary of 'em since I come here."

Wiley said was that right, and spat on

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a double-tree. He rubbed; beneath the mud, he turned up a red rose on the yellow paint, entwined in a black vine. "Looks sound." "Say!" he chuckled, "I'll bet if we were to keep these washed and varnished, Lee-Master's wagons would look like vegetable carts alongside 'em, eh?"

Malloy squinted. Then he threw out his leg and laughed wildly. "God'n, wouldn't they? We'll work the butts off them lazy swampers and give 'er a try!"

Wiley laughed with him. "Here, have one of mine," he said, offering a cigar. "They cost two bits."

Malloy sniffed it and put it away. "Well, let's chase the horses around and see if they can go two laps without wheezing."

Brogan mourned over the raw, ill-matched stock and said they definitely had possibilities, and it must keep Malloy jumping to keep such hard-working stock looking so thrifty.

"Well, God'n, it does!" Malloy admitted.

IT ENDED with his accepting another cigar and the suggestion that they buy some new horses for the express runs, take all the extra stock off expensive grain and pasture them at the swing stations.

For a week, Brogan's eye went over every entry in the books, half-understanding; his hands tried each horse and scrap of equipment, comprehending fully. He compiled a list two feet long of the necessaries of an operating stage line, a line capable of carrying the mail on a daily run.

But somehow, despite his industry, he could not get his hands on the satisfaction he had looked for out of being the Big Boss. Fulfillment eluded him. He decided it was

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the uncertainty of knowing whether or not they were actually going to carry the mail.

THAT ended when something called a pro tem contract came through a month after Skidmore's visit. It was perfectly official, however, and would serve until Washington got around to approving the genuine, four-year paper. In heaven, Wiley thought ironically, a notary's stamp a mile wide must by now have come down at the foot of his sinner's papers. Without ostentation, a few days later, the first mail coach went out. That same day, the wrappings came off at LeeMaster's Mountain Stage Line, with a pennant across the street:

LeeMaster's, the Line of Service!

His claim to the title was that passenger rates had been cut, that the food was the best in Eastern Oregon, and that the stage did not roll that would take a man to Garnet or any of the way points faster than a Mountain Stage. His strategy was plain—he was out to corral all the passenger traffic until he could do something about the mail.

Wiley talked it over with the Pennoyers and matched LeeMaster's rate. Then he set out to do something about his brag of getting there first. He advertised for horses, sat on a nail keg and watched horse-ranchers lead their horses by at a rapid walk. He was buying for himself this time, classifying and teaming as they passed.

In thickening weather, he broke a team and took it up and down the road. He taught the horses their names by calling them out and hitting them on the rump with a pebble. He had the first team about ready for the road when they heard about a livery stable being auctioned in Garnet. They had nothing much up there by way of a station but a roof, four poles and a haystack, and Wiley determined to have a crack at it.

The day before the auction, he rode shotgun messenger with Horse Elkins, one of their two drivers. Up one day, down the next. Horse Elkins was a fox-dyed little driver, tough, vain of his black sideburns and tattooed forearms. He was a villainous looking man who drove like a saint, and could pop a single hair out of a horse's head, it was told, without drawing dandruff.

They larruped over the bridge across Canyon Creek, mounted along a stony hillside to a low pass, and entered a country of tamarack and serviceberry. It had snowed lightly the night before, and the road bore the clean iron print of LeeMaster's stage. He had gone out on the stage a half-hour before on the regular daily run. Neither of them mentioned him, but Elkins said, once:

"Fastest coaches on the road. Hogwash!"

Ten miles later, near the first swing station, he said: "This here is a good team."

"Thanks," Wiley said.

Elkins tooled the coach into the yard and sat teetering his foot on the brake while he watched the team led off to roll, be washed, fed and blanketed. "That there," he said, "is a damn good team."

They swung back into the road. They climbed and turned and switched higher into the mountains. From the road, trails led here and there to the smaller camps, the placers and coyoteholes. A sticky laurel grove filled the air with a strong spice scent. At one point, they could see where LeeMaster's stage had stopped for some minor repair. Boots had trampled the thin snow on the nigh side of the wheel-tracks. Coming out on the shoulder of a mountain, they had a view of LeeMaster's stage below them, working down Two-Mile Grade to Sheep Creek ford. Patches of snow glared on the hillside, pierced by the splinter-like spears of starved sedge.

"If we'd have left ten minutes earlier," Wiley said, "we could have passed him yonder in the canyon before we crossed the creek. But it's all one-way after that."

"Why, hellsfire," Elkins protested, "we can still pass! That's his first team, and the last two miles of it. So tight he spaces his stations like a drunken printer leadin' obituaries."

Wiley shifted and crossed his knees. "Why don't we?"

Elkins leaned forward, gloved hands backs-up, arms stretching as he let the lines slide through his fingers. The horses came into full gallop down the grade. It was straightaway, with a gentle drop and easy curves. They came down into a motte of mountain ash ablaze with berries, levelled off in a meadow and whipped off left to drive straight at the ford. Sheep Creek had carved itself a wide granite trough through the mountains, too wide for a country stage

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road to bridge. At this one point, the banks let down for a few hundred feet to permit a fording.

Someone on LeeMaster's stage sighted them. There was a general straining of necks and a quickening of the clatter of mud flying from the horses' hooves. The road was a little wider here than anywhere, but there were no bar-pits and the terrain favored passing. Tatters of wild cherry slapped at the olive-green coach panels as Horse began working left to pass. He was on his second team, still cussing the orneriness out of them, whereas LeeMaster, who figured a tired team might as well come on down the Two-Mile Grade since it was really resting anyway, was squeezing out the last of his first team's strength.

Elkins had his leaders reaching past the big yellow rear wheels of the Mountain Stage for the step-plate. They could see Shively, the driver, popping his whip like a fool. They could see and hear Jim Shaniko, enormous in a deep sheepskin coat, standing beside Shively and roaring down at them that he wouldn't be crowded off the road by anybody. LeeMaster, auction-bound, had a leather curtain stripped back within the coach to shout that it was impossible to pass without an accident.

Elkins yelled back, "Plenty of room for everybody! Jess don't try to crowd me, Shively!"

It was Brogan's first face-to-face meeting with Shaniko since the shooting; he thought how easy it would be to pull his Colt and quietly put a bullet through him. It was too close for even him to miss. The difficult part would come in court, and so he sat with his hands thrust into his coat pockets.

The road tipped down, affording a view of the crossing. The far bank was a fifty- or sixty-foot rimrock bluff up which a road had been chipped to the sagebrush flats. The near bank was more gradual, but still a drop, and the rocky bed of a spring branch had been appropriated for a descent to the creek. Water still trickled down the middle of the gravelly road and occasionally cut generous chunks out of it. To Wiley, it did not look wide enough for two Concords abreast, but Elkins seemed to think so and was lambasting overlasting hell out of the leather springs as he urged the horses on past, with one rear wheel off the road. Brogan had to grip the side rail, and only the broad leather driver's strap kept Horse in place.

Suddenly he said, "Take the whip. He's going to try something."

They were booming down the ragged slot into the wide creek bottom. Elkins' leaders were abreast of Shively's swings. This was when Shively tapped his leaders over to the left, appropriating the whole road and the ford they were just entering. Wiley felt the coach lurch as the front wheels dropped into the muddy gutter; the tongue slammed the wheelers almost off their feet, and there was a bad moment of waiting to go over. Elkins shouted: "Let them have it!"

Wiley stood up and hurled the long buckskin cracker at the head of the off leader. The whip was as true as a rifle, fashioned of water-seasoned oak and braided rawhide, and it took a chunk out of the side of the horse's neck. It screamed angrily and hawed over. Shively stood up to fight his team, which was carrying him into the other gutter. The coach struck and lunged, went up on two wheels and struck the ford that way. The horses for some mad reason started upstream. The Concord hung for about twenty feet, and then a wheel dropped into a mudhole and it slowly and wearily leaned over and lay on its side.

Shaniko landed in six inches of muddy water with a splash like a bull moose starting across a stream. Shively landed among the wheelers' hoofs.

Horse Elkins cursed his team gently and affectionately all the way up the rise to the sage flat, and there, as they crossed it, he said, "If you'll just drop that whip back in the socket, Brogan, I think we'll make it on schedule after all."

VIII

WILEY encountered Pete LeeMaster again in Garnet the next day, at the auction. LeeMaster had ridden up on a horse from a swing station. They bid against each other, but never locked glances. The feed barn went to LeeMaster, who could not be outbid after being whipped on the road.

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Riding back with Horse Elkins on his down-run, Wiley saw Jim Shaniko with a crew of four men at Sheep Creek ford, making a road repair. Shaniko was on one knee at the edge of the little stream, panning gravel in a shovel. Elkins snorted.

"Some men can't pass a yard o' river sand without gettin' delusions of gold dust."

Brogan had moved to a room in a boarding house. Upon his return, he had a bath, changed to clean underwear and sat on the bed staring out the window. A gray sky hung over the mountains. It was the color of his thoughts. They were about the foolishness of mankind in general and Wiley Brogan in particular. He had a pocketful of money and more coming to him every week. He had never in his life put out so little for so much. He had a new suit just like the old one but with sound cuffs. Around Canyon City, he had begun to rouse a sort of awe, as though he combined the derring-do of Wild Bill Hickock and the business sagacity of E. H. Harriman. If people knew he had once been a horse-breaker, they did not mention it. Only the other day, Foscoe, the banker, had said to him in the restaurant:

"Well, what do you think? Is the Molly Maguire business going to raise freight rates?"

The two phenomena seemed totally unconnected, but Wiley said after some thoughtful probing of his food, "I've been trying to decide that myself."

He had been trying to decide too many things. Whether he was any happier now than he had been. If he were not, whether it was because he was shirt-tail cousin to a criminal or because he was in love with Dru.

She was a sweet and attractive girl, but she was also a business woman. She was nice to him, but why not? They were partners. She was a lot sharper than he was, knew how to drive a bargain with a feed merchant or a horse-trader, and maybe if the opportunity presented itself some day, she would ease him out of the business so neatly he would think he was being promoted.

It all hung on the fact that he had come in to her with dirty feet. And that she had been willing to receive him. Their romance was as heart-warming as the mating of a dollar bill and a sawbuck. But he was certain now that he had done what the business men told him it was bad strategy to do in financial transactions. He had become emotionally involved with her.

He supposed old Elkins had apprised them of the race, but he went down nevertheless to make his report. Pennoyer was out somewhere, Mrs. Pennoyer was fussily posting letters in the cage, and Dru was at the roll-top desk. He sat on the edge of the desk.

She was involved in inventorying office supplies. For a moment frowning over a total, she did not look up, and Wiley improved his time by admiring the clean grace of her body, the slender waist and long thigh-lines, the small bosom making itself noticed despite a demure white shirtwaist. He sighed.

Then she turned quickly and put her hand over his, as casually as though she had been doing it for years. "Wiley, I knew if you went out with Horse something would happen! But this time I'm not going to scold you."

"I don't know what we proved. We got there first, but we lost the feed barn."

"At thirty-seven hundred, he can have it! You're even with Shaniko too, aren't you?"

Brogan felt of his ear. "Not quite." Her hand was still over his; he turned it over and squeezed her palm. He carried her hand up to look at it. She wore a small ruby ring on a finger which did not matter. The tips of her fingers were slightly squared off. "Nice," he said. "Smaller than mine. But the fingers mean you could go ten rounds with me in a business deal and leave me punchy."

Her eyes disciplined him. "Wiley," she said, "you're as transparent as an ounce of ice. You've been thinking that we might come to resent you, haven't you? Do you think we could resent what you've done for the line, too?"

"What I did for the line was to get it a contract."

""—And rebuild all the rolling stock, and train the horses so they were worth their feed, and—That's foolishness," she said.

Wiley knew all these things as well as

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she did; the line might never have amounted to a damn without him. Thoss Pennoyer knew as little about staging as an elk knew about trimming hats. It forced him to the realization that what was really on his mind was the left-handed position it gave him with her.

"Right," he said. "It's foolishness. But this isn't foolishness. I wish to the devil I were breaking horses again. There's one thing I didn't figure on."

"What was that?"

He jerked his thumb. "Can she hear?"

"When she's posting mail, you could fire a gun and she wouldn't hear."

Wiley bent forward and pressed his lips gently against hers. She closed her eyes, but suddenly opened them and sat back. "For heaven's sake!"

"I didn't figure on you, is what I was going to say. I'm what old Foscoe would call emotionally involved with you. And how can it go any farther with—Well—"

"Because you made us take you in?"

That cool, blue look of logic was in her eyes again, but mixed with it was a drop of unhappiness. "You're a simple-minded sort, Wiley. I guess all men are. What's really bothering you is that you don't think I'm good enough for you. Did you know that? You think you're depraved because you sold LeeMaster down the river; and you think I'm depraved because I let you. Why, anything you could do to Pete LeeMaster would be a kindness! But you're used to women who think they're ruined if they pass a pair of men's overalls hanging on the line. The funny part is, no matter how low a man may sink, he still can't get over the notion that almost any woman in the world would be lucky to land him!"

Her face took on a surprised look, as though she had just seen the whole, wicked truth of this. She tipped her chin up and rose from the chair.

Wiley's pride was pinked. "That's a hell of—That's a tarnal thing to say to a man! Even a depraved man like me can't twist words the way a woman can." He stood. "Well, I'm glad we've got that cleared up. I'm a degenerate. But I'll stick around and run things in my depraved way until they're going smooth, and then I'll get out."

The side door opened and Thoss Pennoyer came in quickly and shut it. His pallid, mustached face was clammy. His bald dome was shiny with mist; evidently he had carried his hat from wherever he had been.

Dru gave Wiley a look that was a sort of bookmark to hold the place. She hurried to Thoss. "Dad, what is it?"

Pennoyer illogically put his hat on. "I don't know whether this concerns us or not," he said.

"From the way you look," Brogan declared, "I'd say it did."

"I was just down at the hotel. They had a Portland paper there. That fellow Skidmore has been arrested. He's being held by postal authorities for fraud."

IX

WILEY said, "Yep. That concerns us, all right." But no one else had the power of speech, except Mrs. Pennoyer, who asked plaintively:

"What was that, Dad?"

"Nothing, Mother," Pennoyer said. He led the others into the parlor and shut the door. He sat down and dry-washed his face in his hands. He glanced up in sudden querulousness. "Brogan, you got us into—No. No, that isn't true. We all got into it together."

"That's better." Wiley was not panicky, precisely. He felt more like a man in a forest who knows a cougar is stalking him, but cannot see it, and yet knows that, sooner or later, it will drop him. Something had been set in motion which must finally involve him. He knew that, but it was as far as his thinking went.

The organ began to pipe its feeble flutings into the room. Thoss Pennoyer sat swaying on the bench. *Rock of Ages* came forth to purify the atmosphere.

When the hymn had finished, Brogan sat quietly for a long while, peering out the window onto the alley. Distantly he heard the graveyard chatter of Dru and her father.

"—but there really isn't a thing they can do to prove it! We hired him, but what's illegal about that? In fact, it wasn't!"

"That everlasting card," Pennoyer groaned.

"What does it prove? With nobody's name on it but Wiley's"

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"I think I've got it," Wiley said, standing. "It's got only my name on it, and a forgery would be pretty obvious, in a different hand and pencil. Let's say you hired me, after LeeMaster wouldn't and I left the card there. Then this news broke. I didn't say a word. I just went up to the boarding house, packed my clothes, and got out."

In a solemn voice which indicated his religion was actually beginning to get a hold on him, Pennoyer declared: "Perhaps it would make it easier if we knew whether we really considered ourselves guilty. Do we?"

"That's beside the point. If somebody with a star on his vest thinks we are, he's pretty apt to convince us." Brogan put his hat on thoughtfully. "I've got a lot of thinking to do tonight. Unless some new evidence turns up, I'm leaving tomorrow afternoon."

Dru reached up to hold the lapels of his coat. "Wiley, I don't think you're a criminal. Do you think I am?"

"I think we're all opportunists. And there's a point where they begin arresting opportunists."

She pulled his head down and whispered into his ear. "Would you still love me if I were a criminal?"

"I'd bring hard candy to you every week. But I don't think I'll have access to a candy store."

HE MADE it a point to observe his usual routine. When the stage came in toward evening, he saw that the horses got their roll and proper feed. He saw the last workman out before he locked the corral gate and went home. Only a few hours sleep came his way. But he was down at the station at six-thirty to open up. He got the stage off at ten o' clock, and still did not know whether he would be leaving on The Dalles stage at noon, leaving town for good.

At ten-thirty, he saw a heavy spring wagon loaded with Shaniko, four workmen, and their road tools ramble into town. It stopped at the assayer's narrow brick building and Shaniko went inside. Then the superintendent, with a long and bilious look at the depot, drove on.

Something in the stare chilled Brogan. He went inside and cornered Dru and her father.

"Well, I'm getting out."

Smudges darkened the fine skin beneath Drusilla's eyes. "Whatever you want to do."

"All you've got to do is tell them you fired me for inefficiency. We don't know that they'll even ask."

"But if they do, you'll be safe in Idaho or Texas, and we'll be right here trying to keep from stammering."

"You don't think I'm walking out on you, do you? This is for all of us."

In the street a man ran urgently toward the corral. They stared at each other. Pennoyer went to the door. Horse Elkins was wrangling the big main gate shut. He was shouting. "He will, will he? By God, we'll see if he will!"

"Will what?" Brogan demanded, striding to the door.

"Shaniko! He's bringin' an army down the street, packing scantlin's and pick handles!"

Wiley reached above the door for the Henry repeater racked there. If they wanted fireworks—if Wiley Brogan had to leave town hanging to the tail of a skyrocket—it could be managed. He stepped into the yard and ran to help with the gate. Elkins was already locking it. Wiley said, "I'll handle them." He backed off about twenty feet from the gate and waited in the cold shadow hanging from the shake eaves of the depot.

Standing there, he saw Shaniko, unshaven and sunburned from his days on road repair, come to the gate and mount the stringers like a ladder. He swung a leg over as his crew swarmed after him. Brogan fired once, the gun-kick jarring his hat loose, and levered a fresh shell up. The men on the gate froze like chickens under the shadow of a goshawk. Shaniko's big face turned quickly.

"Shaniko," Brogan called, "If you haven't had enough, I'll finish you off right here. But those shovel dancers of yours will watch from outside."

The swampers and hostlers from Mountain Stage were sliding back into the street. Shaniko dropped inside. Horse Elkins

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waited, holding his twenty-four-foot whip with the lash doubled back. Shaniko unbuckled his gun-belt and let the Colt drop.

"I've seen dirty driving in my time," he said, "but that beat all! You wouldn't want to fight with scantlin's?"

Brogan said, "Take the gun, Horse."

Elkins caught the Henry and Brogan walked to the woodpile. He matched a couple of sixteen-inch jackpine limbs and threw one at Shaniko's feet. Men were streaming to the gate, shouting the word. Shaniko picked up the club. Wiley's stomach griped. He was a giant, a tousled giant in striped jersey, pants too short for him and size fifteen boots. He was coming toward Wiley with his big shoulders sloping, the club resting along his neck, moving with a sidewise crab-walk. Wiley was uncertain; he hoped he would be hurt early, and lose that fear so that he could go to work. He sidled around with notion of maneuvering Shaniko against a wall.

Shaniko made a rush, feinting with his left hand to draw Wiley's club, then smashing down at his head. Wiley flung his own bludgeon up and parried it. He felt the vibrating jar of it to his elbow. Shaniko's feet were working like a boxer's, carrying him in and out. Wiley stabbed his club endwise into his face, cutting him deeply on the cheek. Shaniko roared.

Somewhere, a man was shouting. "Shaniko! Jim Shaniko!"

It got through to the superintendent; he frowned. Wiley, suspecting a trick, kept his eyes on Shaniko's face. He was aware of the man climbing the gate, waving a paper. "Shaniko! God's sake, man, what are you about?"

It was Ott, the assayer from across the street. Shaniko said, "Will you wait?"

Brogan stepped back and lowered the club. Ott came piling over the barrier, thrust the paper into Shaniko's hand and began pounding him on the back. "For shame, fighting when you could hire men to do your fighting for you! You're rich, man! The dust you brought me was the real article!"

Shaniko looked at the paper, at Ott, at Brogan. He rubbed his cut cheek. Then he began to laugh, shouting, headlong laughter without any intelligence in it. He balled the paper and threw it at Brogan.

"Thanks, you little Mick! You work all your life for a dollar a day, and then a little hoss-nurse like you throws you in a creek and you strike gold!" He tossed the club away and turned his back. "Go it, boys! I'm already staked out. Sheep Creek ford, and the devil take the hindmost!"

When Brogan went inside, Thoss Pennoyer was rushing about assembling tools, a change of clothing, and some blankets. "Brogan!" he yelled. "Saddle our horses!"

Brogan sat down. "I wouldn't ride fifty feet to stake a claim in any river he'd dirtied with his big feet. Come to your senses. Miners have been over every foot of this country up to ten thousand feet, and do you mean to say they wouldn't have panned along the road?"

"That's just where they might not! Right under their noses. He had the dust, didn't he?"

"Ott said so. I expect he ought to know."

"Well, I'm going up. Have my horse saddled."

Ten minutes later, a shawled and long-faced figure on his white mare, he loped up the road with his pack-horse skipping along after him.

X

BROGAN witnessed the decampment of most of Canyon City. He rented every horse and wagon they could spare, and hung a sign on the gate: *No Horses. No Wagons.* Miners coming out of the hard-rock mines bought food, pick, and pan, rented a horse, and joined the parade. Merchants hawked flat tin gold-pans in the street; the barrels of shovels before Ellison's Hardware sold like candy canes.

Brogan maintained his conviction that if Shaniko were in it, something was as wrong as an aluminum nickel. Beyond this feeling, he was insulated from it all by his own worries.

Something he had hardly thought of before, a new edge of the catastrophe, touched him now. Poor Skidmore. He thought of the little man in the black stovepipe and shortcoat, who had been so eager to help a down-and-outer, so hound-friendly

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that he evidently passed out a card of introduction to the wrong man, at last. His formula had gone against him, his philosopher's stone had begun turning things to brass. Preachers would level bony fingers at him in their sermons, the honest and the uncaught would walk by the jail and try to decide which was his cell; but Harry Skidmore was worth six of any of them. He was a benevolent rascal. If all his philanthropy had been of the kind that had befriended Wiley, he had not made a dollar out of it.

It neared stage-time. Wiley went into the depot. Dru was waiting for him. She held his hands. "Not today, Wiley—please. Not until Dad comes back, or we all move up to the claim."

"All right," Wiley said.

Horse Elkins took out a load of passengers and a sack of mail the next morning. By night, several men had come down with samples and small pouches of dust. They left these at Ott's and hustled on to the saloons. Later, Ott posted the news in his window.

"Red Dog claim, J. Shaniko: Gold, 760 fine. Some osmium and cinnabar.

"Mountain Queen, LeeMaster: Same.

"Lucky Seven, Harkrider: Pyrites, chromite and cinnabar.

"President Hayes, Hixon: Pyrites, chromite and cinnabar."

The list was long, but the amazing thing was that some men had found almost pure gold, while others were finding nothing but pyrites and mud. There were six men who had staked their allotted feet of placer in rich sand. Four of them were Mountain Stage men—Shaniko, LeeMaster, and two others. LeeMaster came back from the camp that night on his big bay mare, leaving his claim for Shaniko to handle.

With Pennoyer still up the hill, Brogan stayed over another night. An unshaven and raging Horse Elkins drove in at nine o'clock the next morning. He came lugging the mail sack inside. He stood in the middle of the room and announced:

"Well, sir, that takes the prize!"

Wiley said, "It does that. When'd you leave? You must have been on the road all night."

"I was. Believe me! *This* side of Sheep Creek! That's the same mail I took up. I dumped my passengers at the hotel on the way in. Those galvanized fools have tore up the ford and strung their rockers and riffles from hell to breakfast. I couldn't get across there with a jackass and a sulky!"

A scroll became legible. "Blocked, eh?" Wiley said.

"There's a hole as big as the Western Hotel where we used to cross. And that's the only fording place between here and Ironside Mountain. What are we going to do with this mail, and all the rest that comes in? Carry it in our pockets?"

Thoss Pennoyer came in shortly afterward. He had a little bottle of mineral flakes which he showed, somewhat sheepishly to his wife and daughter. "It doesn't look highgrade, but I do see some flakes in there. The black ones, see? When I turn it to the light."

Wiley took it out of his hand and threw it in the stove. "Let's go over and talk to Ott."

Pennoyer trailed him across the street, complaining in his old man's whine and getting no answer. Ott was in the rear of his shop, in the dusk of the furnace room. The iron door of his miniature furnace, cherry-red in a squat block of bricks, glowed in the dim light. The racket was almost tangible, the furnace shouting hoarsely, the compressor banging away and overhead the hum and clatter of pulleys and belts. Ott, a fat, graying man, ruddy and sweat-beaded, was drawing a small cupel from the furnace with tongs. He saw them and with some flourish set the cupel down.

"There she is, boys!" he shouted "There's the button! Let's see how much gold this fella's mining—and how much junk."

There was a minute pin-point of meta in the bottom of the clay dish. "Mr. Ott!' Brogan shouted. "I want to ask you some thing. I've heard the balance of metals i any mine is as distinctive as a horse's shoe Is that a fact?"

"That's right. The mint can tell yo where any chunk of gold you sent ther comes from. They got data on every min in the country."

"What about you? Have you got data o all the mines around here?"

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"All the ones I work for. What is it, boys? I've got more samples laying out there than I can assay in a month."

"It'd be a favor to us if you'd kind of check and see if the dust these fellas are bringing in is like any other you've assayed."

"You're right it'd be a favor!"

"A twenty-dollar favor," Wiley said. He gave him a double eagle.

Ott said, Hell, even for twenty dollars—But he decided he couldn't work the button until it cooled, and while he waited he'd look about. They went back to the hall-like front office with its gas-light, safe, dark wall-paper and assorted gold scales. Within the bank-like railing were a desk, ledgers, and cases of ore samples. Ott studied a while, made some notes; clattered his plates over it and stared at them a while. Then he studied some more and sat back against the chair with his sheet of figuring.

"Well, if that ain't peculiar!"

"What do you find?"

"These here samples are all *i-dentickle* with the gold from Ed Hosley's Wildcat mine! They ain't on the same river, neither. They're forty mile apart. Now, boys, what does it mean?"

"Hosley's is out of Garnet, isn't it?"

"About ten mile. He gets his mail there, and his freight."

"And LeeMaster hauls some of his freight and I expect he brings things up for Hosley and Hosley pays him with dust. I was just trying to figure something out."

"What was that?"

"Why it would pay him to dump two or three hundred dollars worth of dust into Sheep Creek and gamble he'd only get half of it back? If it ran Mr. Pennoyer, here, out of business, I guess it would pay, eh? Mr. Pennoyer has a pretty stiff forfeiture clause in the mail contract. Thanks, Ott. Tell the rest of the boys they might as well go home."

"I can't figure you out," Pennoyer complained. "I never know when you're joshing. Was all that straight?"

"Out of Scripture! LeeMaster figures he can stand a layoff for a month or so, but he knows we can't. We're getting too much mail and parcel post to carry by pack-horse, and if we tried they'd never let the trains past the ford, anyway."

Pennoyer stopped in the street and stared toward LeeMaster's. "That's pretty damned bald, I'd say!"

"Bald enough that I suppose eventually you could get an injunction. That would take about six months, figuring roughly. And you'd have to pay geologists and assayers from six states to stand up and say it was *impossible for any two rivers to produce* exactly the same stripe of gold. And then they'd begin contradicting each other, and maybe instead of you getting an injunction they'd decide to change the geology books."

Elkins was out back throwing chunks of bark from the woodpile at a horse, pretending to himself he was disciplining it for getting tangled in a trace. A headlong clatter of hooves down the street signified the arrival of the stage from The Dalles. The varnished green sides glistened as it turned into the yard; it had evidently been through rain. They saw Pete LeeMaster stride across to the depot with one hand in his pocket, coat-tail flipped back and the wind riffling his black hair.

Pennoyer said tentatively, "I guess your stage leaves pretty soon, eh?"

Wiley chewed his lip. The time was now. But a man with two grains of conscience could not leave his friends in a muddle like this.

"I'm going to see LeeMaster after a while," he told the old man. "I'll leave tomorrow. You're not doing anything—why not get Ott to put that in writing and take it up to the mines? The boys will be pulling out of there as soon as they see the assay sheets. I don't think most of them really believed it, anyway."

XI

HE CONTRIVED an inventory of the things he would need. One dozen pick-handles. Six quarts of whiskey. Five pounds of quarter-inch nuts. Powder and wadding for the shotgun.

Understanding the psychology of stable-hands, he reckoned the best way would be to declare a holiday when they came trickling back from the ford, commiserate with them, get them likkered up and then begin feeding into them his own hatred of Lee-

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Master, of which he had a surplus. Pour enough whiskey down their throats and they'd go to battle over child labor in Massachusetts. With a real grievance, they would stumble blind-drunk up the road to Sheep Creek, armed wth pick-handles, neck-yokes, and anything else hard and heavy. When they began to sober, they would be ashamed to admit their foolishness, and keep going.

Yet, first, he aimed to talk to LeeMaster. The stage man was not reasonable, but he was intelligent, and it might be possible to show him that he had mixed cleverness and greed in the proportion indicated for tragedy. LeeMaster, wearing a heavy black coat, lava boots and engineer's breeches, was in a shed supervising the loading of a pack-horse. At Brogan's approach, he turned. The long face with its look of hard, bony force did not react. He held a short length of rope in his hands, and cracked it once against a stanchion.

"I heard you'd left," he said.

"Not yet," Wiley said. "I want to get my hands on some of that gold, first."

LeeMaster's eyes kept moving about his face. "That was quite a break for Jim and me. I'm going up now to get things set up right."

"It was a break, all right. Let's be sure it doesn't turn into a fracture. Got five minutes?"

LeeMaster tossed the rope on a bench. He went toward the station building with his long, pacing strides. There was a muscular vitality about him. He yanked the door open and went through ahead of Wiley, strode into his office and shut the door forcibly. The early dusk of winter had already invaded the room. He took time to light a fizzing carbide light on an extension arm over his desk. He set a cigar smoking in the white heat, and his hand carried it quickly to his mouth.

Wiley looked him over with sour amusement. "You look like an honest-to-God gold miner, Pete. Do you always get togged out like that when you're going to throw some gold in a river and dig it out?"

LeeMaster accepted it as a rather bad joke. "With gold as hard come-by as it is, I don't throw any in a river when I get hold of it."

"Not unless you stand to pan out more than you threw in . . . So you've put the big britches on us, now. We'll never get through till spring, and by that time it will be too late. Is that how it goes?"

LeeMaster pulled the band off the cigar. "I heard they hadn't done the road any good, at that. Well, roads can be rebuilt."

"This one's going to be. Tomorrow."

LeeMaster shook his head. "I wouldn't rush the boys. Any more than I'd rush a hound chewing a bone."

"But I'm going to tie a can to this hound's tail and get him out of my way. I'm going through, Pete. Like that." He smashed his fist solidly against his palm. "I'm going to have a jerry road through that hole they've dug by tomorrow night. And I don't think they'll do any more panning right there."

LeeMaster's pottery-brown eyes crinkled. He laughed softly. "I admire your guts. You're talking as though you were still trying to decide whether to eat the world with tomato sauce or sugar. But you've known you were in trouble for quite a while, haven't you? And you're in it up to your ears, now. Do you know a man named Kane?"

Wiley perceived all at once why he had failed to shake the stage man any more than he had. He said, "Postal inspector?"

"Have you seen him?"

"Not yet. But I figured there must have been some reason you went high-tailing it over to the Central Oregon station. And now you're wound up like an eight-day clock. So he's in town, is he?" He tried to carry it off complacently, but it lay in his belly heavy and cold. "I've got a friend at one of the little P. O.'s along the road. He tipped me off that he was coming."

LeeMaster's mouth eased into a smile, and he chuckled. "Wiley, I'm obliged to you. I did my best to get into this jackpot myself. What are you going to tell him?"

"Let's take it one step at a time," Wiley said. "What did *you* tell him?"

"Nothing. I just gave him the card. I told him I found it in the corral. Which I did."

"What did he say?"

"He didn't say a word. He looked at me a minute and then put it in his pocket."

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"He was probaby thinking what a hellofa friend you'd make, and wishing he had a dozen like you."

"You've still got a chance, Brogan. You could get out now. He doesn't know you by sight."

"You talk like I was on the dodge."

"Actually, I suppose you're not—yet."

"That's where I've got the bulge on you. You fitted yourself for the striped evening clothes when you salted the Sheep Creek mines."

LeeMaster's grip on his cocksureness lost traction. That was a bad word in a mining town.

"Ott discovered the dust you and the rest of your watered-down Buffalo Bills have been bringing in is from the Wildcat placers. There aren't any two dusts alike, you know. Or I guess you didn't. He says this amounts to salting a mine, which puts you right in the seat ahead of me."

"Ott is a two-bit fourflushing fool! If any Wildcat dust got spilled in there, it must have been from a Wells-Fargo chest."

"There haven't been any Wells-Fargo chests over that way yet. I doubt that they leave a trail of gold, anyhow."

Suddenly, Wiley's panic had melted. In its place was a glossy surface of satisfaction, a sense of well-being. It was a feeling so suddenly acquired that he had to glance back to see what had brought it about. He donned his derby and gave it a tap. His rough Irish features were beginning to glow. LeeMaster saw it and pulled his brows in sternly, as though it were the essence of bad taste to smile over mutual hard luck.

"I'm beholden to you, too, Pete," Wiley said. "You put me back on my feet, just now. For a while, I wasn't sure whether I was a train-robber or what. It's that way, when you keep mulling a thing over and looking at yourself in the mirror until the mirror gets tired of looking at you. Come down to it, what did I do? I kept a pint of ninety-proof polecat juice from smelling up a whole county; I kept you from choking the Pennoyers and raising your passenger rates so high nobody but Jim Hill and E. H. Harriman could ride with you.

"The big thing is that I knew that when I did it! I wasn't dickering with you that day; I was sticking pins into you. I wouldn't have done business with you if you'd paid me in diamonds. I knew all about you after I smelled around town and met Shaniko and your competitors. What I'm getting at," he said, "is that if there'd been two Thoss Pennoyers shooting for that contract, they'd have been on their own, as far as I was concerned. I wouldn't have lifted a finger to help either one of them, or to get myself a job. But squeezing you out seems to come more under the heading of bounty hunting. I've got an idea I'll still be around tomorrow. If I am, don't get in my way. I'm coming through like a brick smoke-house out of a cannon."

LeeMaster stood there with the hard white light of the gas fixture on his face and the cigar gone cold. "I hope you can convince Kane of that," he said, then added several remarks that would blister paint.

Wiley was not angered, but it gave him the logical opening he had wanted. You couldn't go around punching people without some kind of chalk-line crossed. He took one step forward with his left foot, jarred LeeMaster in the chest as he fell back and brought his right hand in with all the gathered force of his shoulder behind it. It feathered LeeMaster's cigar in his mouth and snapped his head viciously. The stage man went into the wall with a thud, reeled back a step and reached blindly with his hands. Wiley watched him fall against his swivel chair and slump to the floor, not unconscious, but paralyzed, making deep snoring sounds in his throat and stirring with slow, futile movements.

He went out, looked up and down the street like a man surveying a piece of his own land, and walked up to meet the man named Kane.

XII

NO one had thought to build a fire in the stage depot. The thick walls of volcanic tuff held the dry, incisive cold. When Wiley entered the waiting room, Thoss Pennoyer was sitting on a bench with his coat collar turned up. Dru was fussing with things on the desk, nervously. Mrs. Pennoyer was in the post-office cell.

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There was no indication of trouble, no sign of the inspector, but Wiley played safe. Clapping his hands together briskly, he walked to the small iron stove.

"I guess there's no law against a fire, is there?" he said.

He squatted to whittle pitch-pine splinters, and stuff paper and splinters into the stove. He grubbed for a match. Then he saw the man inside the cage with Mrs. Pennoyer. Evidently he had been kneeling before the safe, out of sight below the half-height partition.

Brogan had brought only part of his optimism back with him. With the forceful gaze of the tall, loosely-built, stern-eyed man on him, he had a jolt of cold shock. He tried to review in one flashing moment of prayer all the reasons why he was not guilty; all the sound country honesty behind his dishonest actions. He had an inspiration.

"Excuse me, mister," he said, "But nobody's allowed back there but the postmistress. Wasn't that the rule, Mrs. Pennoyer?"

The sweet, inconsequential little woman with the soft gray eyes and the skin like chamois stood at her wicket in the manner of a captain going down with his ship. "Yes, Wiley; but this man—"

"My name's Kane." He said that as though it usually brought forth skyrockets and a twenty-one gun salute.

"I don't care if it's Rutherford B. Hayes," Wiley said. "The rule is—"

"I'm with the post office department," said Kane.

"Oh!" Wiley threw the match into the stove. He went to shake hands with Kane. The inspector was big and broad, with a pallid face rutted and gouged with lines and tinged deeply under the eyes a brindle color. He turned immediately to resume his inspection of the safe.

"Better stay here," he said. "I may want to see you."

"You bet."

So they sat there trying to build a fire with three lumps of ice, he, Dru, and Thoss. They made pointless essays into the weather, business, the gold strike. But every spark fell into wet tinder. And every few moments one of them would glance over at Kane, running swift totals on a scratch pad, counting money in the cash drawer, asking Mrs. Pennoyer something about the posting and dispatch of mail. They observed that he had some difficulty moving about among the sacks of mail and packages. After a half-hour more, he came out, shooing Mrs. Pennoyer ahead of him.

He stood by the stove, packing tobacco into a pipe. He lit a splinter of wood and started the pipe. He sat down, crossed his legs, and looked at them.

"Well, I might as well let you have it straight out," he said.

"Is something wrong?" Dru asked quickly. Her eyes were a little too wide, her inflection not entirely convincng.

"Wrong!" Kane bit out. "My dear woman, you're not running a warehouse here—you're running a United States Post Office! If you'd had one more sack of mail in there, I couldn't have got about at all. What are you going to do with the next sack of mail that comes in—throw it in the corner by the wood-box?"

They all laughed too loudly, too nervously, at his pleasantry. Brogan recovered first. "It's the first trouble we've had, Mr. Kane. The boys thought they'd struck gold up the line, and they tore the road to billy hell. We'll have it fixed up tomorrow and get back on schedule."

"How do you know you will?"

"We wouldn't have taken the contract if we hadn't been prepared to carry the mail."

"Did it occur to you you could have sent the mail up by pack-horse?"

"It takes a little time to get a pack-string together. And I'm not sure we could have got horses through, even."

Points of light glinted in Kane's deep gray eyes. "Why not?"

"Some local opposition. It's straightened out, now."

"Someone else who wanted to carry the mail?"

Dru came in lightly. "Oh, we've always fought with him. But we think we may have reached an agreement finally."

"I hope so. But I'd watch him. He's a sharp customer, if he's the man I think you mean. He bought me a lunch just to put this in my hands."

He balanced a small, white card on his knee, where they could all see it, the bold

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pencilled scrawl staring blackly at them.

"This will introduce Mr. Wiley Brogan."

Brogan grunted. "Where'd he get hold of that?"

"He told me you tried to use it to get a job with him."

Wiley snorted. "The devil! I went down for a job, all right, but I got into a scrap with his superintendent and lost the card out of my hat. I suppose he picked it up. Say," he said, "you don't suppose he was trying to—?"

Kane smiled and spun the card at the wood-box. "I suppose that's what he was trying to do. Everyone's heard about Harry Skidmore getting in trouble, and I expect the assumption is that everything Harry did must have been crooked. Whereas he was a pretty good man, until he got to playing the horses. He needed money, and the quickest way seemed to be to take it out of the safe and cover it up in his books."

Mrs. Pennoyer said gently, "Why, wasn't that terrible!"

"It was terrible, Mrs. Pennoyer," Kane declared. "But it's no more terrible, in my eyes, than not getting the mail through. I'm going over to Baker, but I'll be back in a couple of weeks. I want every last post-card cleaned up! Otherwise, I'll simply have to see that your contract is cancelled. Do I make myself clear?"

They all agreed that he did, and they trailed him to the door and had his gruff goodbye as he turned and walked off.

NO ONE seemed to care to talk about it. Mrs. Pennoyer moved mail sacks around as though with evidence of good faith. Pennoyer went back and played a hymn. At last Drusilla closed her account book and turned to Wiley.

"Now I know you're a crook. You carried it off too well to be anything else."

He stared transfixedly through the window.

"That's the funny part about it. I had a revelation a while ago. Just as I was about to hit Pete LeeMaster on the jaw, I saw a bright light, and a voice said, 'Hit him. *He's* the real criminal. Compared to him, you're God's right-hand-man.' So I did, and then I heard another voice. It said, 'A pox on your conscience, Brogan. Did you rob anyone? Did you cheat anyone? You put the heel to LeeMaster's neck, but that's an honest man's privilege.' 'But what about the Pennoyers?' I asked. 'I held them up, didn't I?' "

She was listening raptly.

" 'Held them up, indeed!' the voice said. 'Was it that you accepted a bribe, or did you intend to really give service for value received?' 'Well, that,' I said. 'And you were in love with the girl and wanted an excuse to hang around, didn't you?' 'That, too,' I said. 'Well, then!'

"And right then," he said, "was when I knew I could look Kane in the eye and say, 'I'm Honest Wiley Brogan. As to the card, think nothing of it. It was all part of a favor I did myself, the Pennoyers, and the Post Office Department."

XIII

BROGAN missed Pete LeeMaster's departure for the mines, but learned that Ott had been to see him and the stage man was missing. Then, about sundown, in a cold, sweeping dusk, men began trudging back into Canyon City. Ott's place was the first focus of activity; after that it was divided among the saloons. Press Malloy returned with a handful of Oregon Mail yard men.

When the men showed up for work in the morning, the downhill trickle had begun again. Wiley met the workmen with an armload of bottles and a handshake. "Boys, I think we'll all take a little holiday. That was a poor joke, and we need something to take the taste of it from our mouths."

He drew a cork and started the first bottle around, while he wound a corkscrew into the second. They congregated by the corral. Press Malloy stood at the gate, flinging his leg out recklessly and said that it was a hell of a doings when a man could salt a mine and get away with it. Brogan said he wasn't sure he would get away with it, and Horse Elkins lowered the bottle quickly to ask what he meant.

"I'm going up and kick him to the devil out of our way."

Elkins said he'd like to see that. "You're bound to," said Wiley. "Before I can turn loose on him, I've got to show him a U. S. Mail coach, so you'll drive up first. When he turns you back, I'll step in."

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Press Malloy laughed one short guffaw and said he'd like to see that, too; he might go along in the stage. "I don't know about that," said Brogan. "Anybody who goes up is apt to be pulled into it. I guess you'd better stay here."

"Pulled into it! You think I'd be hangin' back suckin' my thumb?"

Brogan admitted he might need help. "He may back down, and he may not. He'll be fighting for his life up there. And we'll all be fighting for our jobs, because the inspector was through yesterday and read us the riot act."

He had planted the seed, and now he watered it generously with whiskey. But they were all still in bleary good humor, running more to affection for each other than for dislike of Pete LeeMaster, and Brogan suddenly got to his feet and said:

"Well, boys, it's been a good party. But I've got to get up there. Hitch up a team for Horse. If you don't see us again, why, the best to all of you."

They moved into the horse barn. They fumbled a bit with the harness, had some trouble with the horses, but ended by getting the animals on the pole. Brogan began loading pick-handles into the coach. Finley, the company blacksmith, a thick-necked man with the blackest fingernails in town, squinted.

"You ain't thinking you'll *need* them things?"

"I'm not going up to mend picks. It's a little matter of pride, with me. When a man says I can't do a thing, I usually end up by making a stab at it. Press, you coming?"

Malloy hefted a pick-handle and smote his palm with it. He drove a look of woozy truculence about the hangers-back. "Sure. I'm always ready to go out and fight for somebody's job that ain't got the guts to fight for his own!"

Finley drew in his chin. He was a ruddy fellow who wore collar-band shirts but no collar, and a mustache that was one-sided because he always chewed the left side when he was thinking. "That's a nice thing!" he declared. "Nobody's asked us to go."

"I'm asking you now," Wiley stated.

Finley declared that he was always ready for a mill, and demanded whether the others weren't; and they bragged and pounded each other on the back, and Wiley shoved them all into the stage before they could change their minds. He ran back to the office and acquired one sack of mail from Mrs. Pennoyer, to make the run official. He was loading the old shotgun of Pennoyer's with quarter-inch bolts when Dru came in.

"Wiley, what in heaven—!"

"Just propaganda," he said. "We're taking some mail up. I think LeeMaster will quit, when he knows I'm still in circulation. If he doesn't, the boys and I know how to make him quit."

She gestured distastefully. "But—that horrid thing!"

"Shaniko's got a Colt that's just as horrid. Believe me, if there was any other way to rebuild that road than to go out and start building it, I'd take it."

"When do you think you'll be back?"

"Just as soon as we get the job done. If it's after dark, we'll be able to use some coffee and sandwiches." It would give her something to do beside walk up the walls, he reckoned. The men rushed to the bastions and the women manned the sandwich boards.

"You ought to take some sandwiches with you," she said, thinking one thing and saying the other, her eyes going over his face.

"Oh, we'll be all right. Well—take it easy," he grinned.

"You, too, Wiley." She stood in the doorway as he walked to the coach and climbed up with Horse Elkins. As the brake kicked off and the horses lunged into the collars, she waved and quickly turned and shut the door.

AN HOUR of being jostled and thumped about, a cold wind flapping in their faces, began to sober Brogan's army. They pawed over the pick-helves and tried them for heft. Wiley could hear them making boastful talk to keep their spirits up. They all knew LeeMaster. They knew about the notch in Brogan's ear; they knew LeeMaster was fighting for existence, and they wondered how far he would go to make his brag stick.

They changed teams at Sawmill station and slung into the twisting climb that spilled over onto Two-Mile Grade. At the

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station, Brogan got inside with the others. From the top of the grade, he had his first view of what had happened at Sheep Creek.

Sluices, rickety flumes, rockers and rock piles made a mile-long miners' battlefield of the wide gorge. Already most of them were deserted, but above and below the ford a few men still panned and shovelled. The greatest turmoil was at the ford itself. Lofty sand-bars had been created by the digging of long trenches in the creek-bed; the trenches had filled with muddy water, and a few men standing by them were unenthusiastically shovelling sand into a sluice.

As they rocked on down the grade, Brogan watched the brisk assembly of men at the near side of the ford, just where the road dipped. He sat there working a side-hammer of his shotgun and trying to plan through what was bound to be a mighty planless affair, once it started.

Then the road pointed dead at the ford, and he could not see ahead without exposing himself. Wild cherry tangles rattled along the coach-panels, and he knew they were almost to the creek. The brake-shoes ground rustily. The sudden slowing of the stagecoach lifted him half off his seat. The coach stopped; they heard nothing for an instant but the blowing and stamping of the horses and the plopping of collected mud on the ground.

"You fellas ever saw a stagecoach before?" Elkins voice came.

Pete LeeMaster's voice had a nervous bite. "Turn it around, Horse. There's no way through here."

"I'm packing the mail—you know that, don't you? I'm willing to try 'er if you'll get out of the way. If you won't, it's a federal matter."

"So is this," Shaniko declared. "This is gover'ment mineral land."

Elkins said once more, "Get out of the road. I'm going through."

LeeMaster's voice was lower. "Turn it around, Jim."

Elkins snarled something, and Brogan exclaimed: "The dirty pigs are laying hands on the team!"

Finley and Malloy went out the left-hand door, and Wiley threw open the other. There were six of them in all. and they came out armed with white new hickory bludgeons.

"Roll 'er, Horse!" Brogan shouted. Elkins gave the leaders the buckskin but handed them in simultaneously, so that they reared above the dozen-odd men moving in to grab at headstalls. They fell back. Horse let the team go, high-stepping into the midst of them as they plunged down the short tilt to the creek. Pete LeeMaster led the retreat, backing swiftly with his eyes on Brogan and his hand resting on the butt of his revolver. Wiley made a swift alteration in plan. He didn't like the cornered-badger look about LeeMaster. He did not trust the way he seemed to be trying to spur himself into something he was afraid of doing. He tossed his pick-helve to the seat beside Horse and pulled the shotgun out the coach.

LeeMaster ran back through the sand-bars into the wash. Brogan's men had made contact with the enemy. There were some good, solid cracks of hickory. They had the initial advantage, but some of the others had made it to tool-stacks and were passing out sledges, shovels and pry-bars.

Up and down the wash, miners were running to watch the fight. Brogan, pacing past the now-stalled stage, noticed that they kept out of it. There was a cleavage here as plain as a ruled line: LeeMaster's flunkies were the only ones standing up to them.

Wiley stopped on high ground to watch it. LeeMaster had pulled back to the top of a gravel-bar, but Jim Shaniko, swearing and swinging, was in the midst of it with a shovel, standing off Malloy and Finley with great sweeps of the glistening blade. It seemed to Wiley that, torn up though the wash was, a way could be threaded through it without much shovel-work. A good team could back and cut its way out of a bowling alley without upsetting a pin.

Brogan's men were already deep into the wash, overturning sluices, hurling rockers aside. Round, washed boulders were beginning to fly as Horse Elkins moved in with his whip-arm cocked. He let one go that caught Shaniko on the side and pulled away half his shirt. There was a long, bloody streak across his ribs. Shaniko dropped his shovel and clutched his side; recovering, he caught the shovel up again

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and surged into the stage driver. Finley, the blacksmith, was there to swing a round-house blow that took Shaniko in the belly. Shaniko went down.

LeeMaster was moving in, trying to tighten up his line by bawling at the men. There were five of them still fighting. Brogan shouted at Horse. "Roll her! Behind me!"

He jumped down into the wash and held the headstall of the near leader while Elkins climbed up and seized his lines. Wiley began to work through the gravel pits and piles, the shotgun laid across his left elbow with both hammers cocked. LeeMaster was screaming at his superintendent.

"Jim! Get back here!"

Shaniko pulled himself up once more, standing a moment with feet spread widely and blood running down his face. He saw what had happened to his men, he saw Brogan bringing the rocking Concord through the rubble. Wiley suddenly sensed that he had had enough. He was not afraid, but he was tired—tired of taking beatings and giving beatings. He saw Shaniko turn and say to LeeMaster:

"I taken her this far, Pete. You take her from here."

LeeMaster said, "Get back here, Jim."

But Shaniko shook his head. "You're whipped, Pete; ain't you got sense enough to see it?" And he stumbled aside through the washed cobbles.

LeeMaster drew his Colt. For an instant, Wiley thought he was going to kill the superintendent. But when he fired, it was a swift snap-shot straight at Wiley, and the heart of him seemed to compress and then blow up. He heard a flat, meaty smack beside him. One of the horses screamed—that seldom-heard, shattering cry that is human, but worse than human.

He said, "Lay it down, Pete. Lay it down and git."

He heard the team threshing behind him, and Elkins' tongueless cries of rage. LeeMaster's thumb moved across the spur of the gun-hammer and he brought the gun shoulder high. He said levelly:

"You can cut that one out of the harness, but there'll be the same for the next one."

Wiley started toward him. "No, there won't. You're going back with me." It was someone else's voice he heard; or his own crowded through a tin horn, he thought. He was panicky and uncertain, but still walking forward.

LeeMaster pulled the gun down. He fired, and the bullet sheared down the stock of the shotgun and snagged wickedly through Wiley's bicep. In his panic, he pulled both triggers at once. The concussion and kick were magnificent. He went back two steps and fell flat on his back. He sat there with the gun lying at his feet, clutching his arm, and watched LeeMaster stumble around. LeeMaster's middle was a bloody cave. It was a sickening thing, and it was worse to hear him say:

"By God, boy, I think I'm hurt! I'm shot, boys! By God!" He sounded as though it must be of the utmost concern to every man in Canyon City, that he, Pete LeeMaster, was injured. He was worse than that. He was dying, but incapable of realizing it.

A SPRING wagon carried Wiley back to Canyon City, with Horse Elkins going on up to Garnet. Malloy, Finley and the rest stayed to push gravel around until a stagecoach could traverse the wash without dumping everything out of the rear boot.

Trying to recapture his dismal uncertainties of the last few weeks, Wiley discovered that, if anything were left of them, it had been burned out in those brief moments at Sheep Creek.

It was late when he reached Canyon City. He raised a doctor who cauterized the deep flesh wound in his arm and bandaged it. Then he turned his horse into a stall with a morral of grain, and went into the stage depot. A single lamp burned. At the desk, he saw Dru with her head on her arms, asleep. A big tray of sandwiches rested atop the desk; coffee bubbled slowly on the stove. Brogan came up behind her. Holding her shoulders gently, he kissed her on the cheek.

She awoke and caught a breath.

Wiley said, "This will introduce Mr. Wiley Brogan. Always."

She pulled his head down against her cheek, drowsy and self-satisfied, as only a woman both sleepy and beloved can be. "Who needs no introduction," she said.

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Could It Be That a Man Could Wipe Out Disgrace, and Once More Hear the Mighty Roar of an Applauding Audience as He Entered the Bull Ring?

THE TRUMPET CALLS

By LLEWELLEN HUGHES

ALFONSO ORTINA had come to Lisbon to be killed. His death would be violent. He knew it, was prepared for it. To keep the inevitable appointment he had journeyed all the way from Barcelona across Spain, lingering for a while in Sevilla and Madrid, from which city he had walked mostly on foot, since by that time he no longer had money for bus or train fare.

He would meet Death in a sun-drenched plaza jammed to capacity with cheering spectators, and although he deserved no favors he prayed to the Blessed Virgin for two intercessions; that he be granted the courage to meet the horns and that they would deal, not mercifully, but swiftly with him.

Above all he didn't want them to fail him. His tormented soul shriveled at the thought that he might again lie in agony in a hospital where surgeons might save him and send him forth even less of a man than he was now. He sought nothing save death. That would constitute the measure of his penitence. That, to some extent, would amend a grievous wrong. For when the trumpeter high in the balcony of the arena summoned him to walk out alone with his sword and *muleta* he would be richer, for a few moments, by 30,000 *escudos* which he had willed to the sweetest thing he had ever known, a girl named Angelina.

He sat, now, in a corner of a dark and dismal *cantina* on the *Praca dos Restauradores,* sipping a glass of manzanilla, mak-

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ing it last a long time, because he had money enough only to pay for a night's lodging somewhere. His clothes and scuffed shoes, dusty and begrimed, told that he had traveled far by road. Beside him on the floor was a battered suitcase containing his matador's costume and a few other odds and ends.

Because it was the eve of the four-day festival at the Plaza de Toros, the street outside was rampant with shouts, blowing of horns, clatter of wheels over cobblestones, drunken songs commemorating famous exploits in the bull-ring; a hideous cacophony that Alfonso accepted as a requiem.

One or two people in the *cantina* kept looking at him. They saw that he was painfully gaunt, broad across the shoulders, very narrow in the waist, his hair and eyes a glittering black, his pale cheeks hollowed, lips sensual and cruel, yet curling to gentleness at the corners.

He sat there alone, staring without seeing, staring into the morrow. He could have posed for Velasquez. The painting might have hung in the Alhambra at Granada, a portrait showing a young-old face, man about twenty-eight perhaps, and would be entitled *Espada Acabado,* meaning a a matador who had lost his courage, was through, finished, washed-up.

He took another sip of his sherry and it left a sheen on his lips, giving to their bitterness a false impression of color. From the shadows of the *cantina* a man came toward him and in deference took off his hat; a stumpy individual, his peasant face greasy, for a moment or so he merely gazed respectfully at Alfonso.

He spoke in a wheezing voice trembling with discovery. "If I am not mistaken I am looking at El Ortina, the one-and-only El Ortina, the peerless El Ortina."

Alfonso said, "Leave out the adjectives and you will be right." He smiled at the stranger, and the El Ortina smile, though it seldom came, did something to you, man or woman. Particularly the women! Because it came from the haggard and beautiful head of El Ortina it flew right into a woman's heart, damaged it beyond repair and robbed her of defense and resistance.

"Would the *espada* give me permission to sit for a moment at his table?"

"Of course," Alfonso said. He motioned to a chair.

"And—" the greasy-faced stranger was overcome by the honor—"and perhaps the *espada* will allow me the pleasure of ordering him a glass of manzanilla."

THE large black eyes with their long lashes acknowledged the simple gesture. "If the senor so wishes," he said, "he is at liberty to order a whole bottle."

"*Gracias,* matador." He called a waiter. "A bottle of your very best sherry. Aah! but this is a red-letter day indeed for me," his fat lips purred at Alfonso. "You fight in the special *corrida* on Sunday? Three days from now."

"I am not sure."

"But it is already announced. It is billed on the posters."

"Yes?" Alfonso was surprised and pleased.

"You are to fight the second and fourth bulls, *espada.* That is what it says and all Lisbon is waiting to see you. 'The incomparable El Ortina,' it reads. 'Spain's new Belmonte and Joselito rolled into one.' So says the posters, matador. I would not miss the *corrida* for a hundred *escudos.*"

El Ortina said nothing as his long fingers absently twisted the stem of his wine glass. They would not so bill him in any city in Spain. Not any more. Here, in Portugal, the general public had not yet learned about him. Stuff them with soft soap. What did it matter so long as they paid their hard-earned money at the gates of the *Plaza de Toros,* enriching the pockets of the syndicate.

He knew no one in Lisbon except Tomas Berumen, the arena promoter, although he might run into many old friends here who had come from Spain to attend the festival. Beruman had not yet put his signature to Alfonso's contract, his 30,000 *escudos* asking price in answer to the promoter's letter of inquiry sent to Madrid. Without committing himself as to the money, the crafty Berumen had wired him to come on, and to get to Lisbon it had been necessary to tramp the highroads when he couldn't snitch a ride.

The botle of manzanilla had arrived, the waiter drawing the cork, filling two small glasses.

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"Matador," the stranger toasted exuberantly, "to your long life, and the best of luck on Sunday."

Under ordinary circumstances Alfonso would have damned him to hell. The muttonhead couldn't be a true enthusiast or he would not have uttered such ill-omened words. As a rule bullfighters were scared stiff by wishes of good luck, of anything at all having to do with their chances in the ring. Nothing more tended to set them on edge, unless it was a tactless reference to a horn taken by a matador, dead or alive.

But Alfonso didn't damn the generous stranger. In the coming engagement with *El Toro* good luck was all to the bad. The toast should have been, "Matador, I hope you get it in the lower part of the groin and it rips up through your gizzard right to your chin, guts spurting." Ah, yes! But the good wishes continued to rankle. "Good luck! Hope you find the courage to face the horns. Ignominiously you funked them, white-liv eredly and before your whole *cauderilla,* including your faithful valet Diestro, in Sevilla and Madrid."

Having thrown a third glass of manzanilla into him, Alfonso now tossed another. *Ole!"* As he had suspected and no longer feared from his yawning yokel, he heard him saying, "You took a bad *cornada* in Barcelona a year ago, didn't you, matador? It was in all our newspapers here. You almost died, didn't you?"

Alfonso nodded, and the nod said, "I did die."

"You are fully recovered now?"

"Fully recovered." The glossy lips were saying, "Recovered physically more or less, but sick unto death with remorse and a fear inside me like a palsy."

The stranger's friends were leaving and he was bursting to inform them that his hunch was correct, that he had drunk a glass of wine with the world-famous and illustrious El Ortina.

"Gracias," he awkwardly bowed in parting. *"Gracias, gracias,* my *espada.* I will cheer for you on Sunday until I burst my lungs."

He trotted away like a prancing pony; one of Lisbon's millions whom Alfonso would never again see, a well-wisher, a passer-by, who for a couple of *escudos* had purchased a bottle of manzanilla and left it behind him on the table. Ortina's eyes measured its contents. More than half full. It would last him for an hour's reflection. Then to find a night's lodging and see Berumen in the morning.

Lifting his glass he made a wish to the face that was haunting him. "Back home. Back to your mother and father who weep for you—as I do. Back to your one-time betrothed who will forgive you and again take you to his heart. Marry him, have children, and you will yet find happiness."

Exhausted from his day's walking, his brain reeling, he buried his head in his arms on the table. . . . Ah, yes, he'd come a long way since he was a ragged urchin intrepidly fighting the bulls let loose in the cobbled streets of Zaragoza, his sword a broom handle, his *muleta* his ragged bit of a shirt. Mere skin and bones, he was. A crust of bread! A bone snatched from a pack of snarling mongrels! Good God, those were the findings of the Duke of Alba's jewels supposedly hidden in the ruins of Zaragoza castle! Bootblack, seller of matches outside then inside the arena, page-boy to Juan Belmonte, then *novillero,* and at last El Ortina the matador!

He had learned to copy Belmonte's matchless skill with the cape, his poetry of motion in the *veronica.* He had studied El Gallo's *mariposa* and come to equal it. He could go in over the horns with the breathless sword-play of Joselito. Flowers thrown by dark-eyed senoritas at his feet. Signals of high favor from the box of the *presidente.* Deafened by the acclaim from thousands of throats. Carried on tumultuous shoulders through hundreds of streets. Perfumed letters, oft-times embossed with crests. Gold pouring into his lap in an ever-increasing stream. Provocative eyes submissively inviting. Gifts of precious stone. Teresa, Pepita, Consuelo, Dolores—*Angelina!"*

Angelina.

HE HAD first seen her at the Blue Grotto nightclub in Valencia. That afternoon he had killed magnificently in the bullring to the screaming adulation of tens of thousands, and with a group of his attendants he was celebrating his success at a supper party, Lupita the castanet dancer beside him.

Ole! He couldn't keep his gaze from the young girl across the room, her golden hair

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and rose-petal complexion proclaiming her to be English. Ordering one of his attendants to find out who she was, the information surprised him when it came.

"Her name is Angelina Destin. She is eighteen, of poor parents, works in an office as typewriter, and lives here in Valencia. The young man with her is the son of Senor Noriega, the banker. She is engaged to him."

The latter news imparted a distaste to El Ortina's champagne. All his life a brigand element in him had coveted other men's possessions.

"Pay them my compliments," he smiled, "and ask if they would care to join us in a glass of wine."

"Yes, master."

It was a request they could scarcely decline, seeing where the invitation came from, the great El Ortina, magnet for the eyes of all Spain. Side by side they came across the floor, the man tall and dark, the girl fair and slender, her eyes cornflower blue. It delighted Valencia to see them together, for it was the story of Prince Charming and Cinderella all over again.

At close range she was lovelier than ever. Her shyness, her innocence, the long lashes shielding her eyes under his compliments—all these things inflamed El Ortina. Everybody in the restaurant watched them, all fully aware of his many love affairs, his strange power over women.

He proposed a toast to their happiness. He admired her engagement ring, a Noriega heirloom. As the party was about to break up, he said, "I would like both of you to be my guests at the plaza tomorrow afternoon. There will be seats for you in the president's box."

The madonna-like Angelina drew in her breath. Guests of the world-famous El Ortina!

He lifted her hand to his lips. "In the fourth *corrida* I fight a bull from the ranch of Los Montijo. I will dedicate his heart to you."

"Oh!" The honor, given with all the El Ortino fascination back of it, brought about the quick rise and fall of her breasts. She managed to say, "It—it is most flattering of you."

There was a slight frown on the handsome face of her escort and El Ortina paid him a bow. "If my work is sufficiently good, I will present you, Senor Noriega, with the bull's ears—if you will be so kind to accept them. Mounted in your library, your charming wife can point them out to her children some day in the future and say they were a gift from the dead and forgotten El Ortina."

Delivered in tones of studied emotion, the words clouded her cornflower eyes. And so, having touched her heart, his performance in the bullring the next day had never been more brilliant. In an arena packed with humanity, shrieking with fervor over his seemingly effortless *mariposas,* then suddenly hushed as he stood motionless to meet the final charge, going in over the horns with the sword. In the pandemonium that ensued it was seen that a young golden-haired girl threw her corsage at his feet. It became known that the young man with her was to be given the ears of the slain bull. *Hola!*

El Ortina made that presentation to him at a supper party that evening. From that time on he never saw Sebastian Noriega again.

How had it gone thereafter? Cartagena, Balboa, Valladolid. Across the sea to Mexico and Peru. For two years and more, until she was twenty-one, Angelina was present at every *corrida* he fought. Her engagement ring, the Noriega heirloom, was gone from her finger. She was no longer betrothed to any man, though she had a diamond and sapphire ring given her by El Ortina. That was all. Back in Valencia where she was born her friends were appalled by her foolishness, by a reprehensible conduct so utterly unlike her and her religious upbringing, by her continued attachment to a gaunt-faced matador who, it was said, had long-since tired of her.

And then, at long last, the finish of El Ortina! In Barcelona. In the *plaza de toros* before a stricken multitude! An afternoon when the star in his heavens, shining like Vega, suddenly blacked out at the very zenith of his career!

He and Manuelo Cortez were to fight four Granada bulls. Both matadors were parading at the head of their strutting and gaily caparisoned *cauderillas* when—all at once—he saw her! She was seated alone in one of the lower tiers. Odd that amongst so

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many thousands his haggard eyes were drawn to her face as if pulled by cords.

IT WAS almost a year since he had broken all association with her, Rolle the French actress having been installed in her place. He saw that the bloom of her had flown. There were depressions in her cheeks. Her eyes no longer had their pristine blue. Yet devotion and love for him remained in them still, and for a moment the great El Ortina's step faltered.

One might have thought a stone had struck him. The damage was deeper than that. His conscience, never before having bothered him, was as a spear turning inside him. It prodded him to glance at her again.

She was not so well dressed as formerly. Her hands were gloveless. The diamond and sapphire ring he had once given her was missing from her finger. Absolute necessity must have forced her to part with that. Money for sustenance, perhaps. Train or bus fare enabling her to come to Barcelona for the city's gala welcome to him. Again the spear turned in his chest.

At his best he had always been nervous before a *corrida.* Now the sorcery of want of confidence fastened a hold on him, the bedevilment from a pair of eyes. He could still feel them on him as he marched around the arena. They tortured him because they made him afraid, showed up the rags of his soul.

Across the vast plaza the trumpet blew a call. Behind his *barrera* the idol of Spain watched a black bull rush from the *toril* and come slithering to a stop of puzzlement in the center of the ring. Several *toreros* ran out with their capes so that he might study his adversary, watch the manner of the charge, the hook of the horns. A big surly animal with the knowing eyes of a robin. *Eyes!* A woman's pale-blue eyes! El Ortina passed a hand across his face to blot them out.

Rabidly anxious for a sight of him the people were demanding his appearance in the ring, and in response he ran out there, letting out the cape. As he went through a series of *veronicas* he found the bull uncertain in its charges, truculent, formidable as a tank and as big. He also found that he was away off in his timing and could do nothing to correct it, his play with the cape lacking grace, particularly when he went in close to the horns.

He could tell that the spectators didn't like his work because of the quality of their voices, the unsustained volume of their roaring, their lapse into murmuring, the waterfall sound of their criticism. Plainly he wasn't at his best. Nowhere near it. Things kept going wrong. He passed the bull poorly and on the wrong side. Once his foot slid on a small pool of the animal's saliva and only its eagerness saved him as a gasp of disapproval went up from the stands. Angry with himself he managed to finish with a fairly good *media-veronica* before he returned to the barrier on stiff legs.

Not only was his own work below standard, the work of his *picadors* and *banderillas* was oddly poor, failing him in their turn by not sufficiently weakening the powerful neck-muscles. His nervousness increased. Everything was going haywire. Calls of derision came from the crowd.

Intuition was taut as a vibrating wire within him, telling him that he was in for it! Its inevitability was in the hard sunlight, the muffled unrest in the air. It was in the brassy note of the trumpet that summoned him forth alone.

He started out there in a pretense of bravado. He threw his hat behind him with a show of nonchalance. The gesture was false. He was gripping the stick of his *muleta* too tightly, his fingers on it frozen.

In the center of the ring he took his pose of challenge, standing motionless, sighting the bull at a short distance along the mocking glitter of his sword. *El Toro* pawed the ground with its swift and dainty feet, put its head down, suddenly charged.

Again he passed the animal on the bad side, permitting it to turn sharply within its length and re-charge in a burst of fury.

The left horn lunged upward at the *muleta.* In the split-second's time at his disposal to pass he failed to get the red cloth clear across the width of his narrow waist. The long curving horn entered his right groin, hooked in the abdomen, lifted him into the air. Impaled, arms and legs askew, the horn didn't come out. Instead it took a deeper thrust into the bowels. With a shake of the massive head, El Ortina came off, thumping down to the sand in a grotesque and inert posture.

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He realized it was the worst *cornada* he had ever taken. Mercifully he fainted. A dozen *toreros* raced out with their capes to draw away, the bull having taken a *quite* over the prostrate body, its left horn a gleaming red. In a stunned silence, the spectators rigid as the columns of the arena, the maddened bull was lured away from its *quite* and El Ortina rushed to the infirmary under the stands. The surgeons there would be of little use to him. He needed only a priest to administer the sacraments. . . .

TO BANISH the hellish nightmare of that afternoon his arm now swept it away. The smash of glass scared the wits out of him. In the gloom of the *cantina* he saw that he had knocked over his glass and bottle and that a waiter was cleaning up the broken bits on the stone floor. *Hola!* Now look what he had done.

"Does the *espada* wish for another bottle?"

"No, I've had enough." He reached for his hat, picked up his suitcase. "I'd better," he half-apologized to the waiter, "do my sleeping elsewhere. *Buenos noches.*"

"The manzanilla—it is not yet paid for."

"What!"

"The senor say to charge it to you." He presented the bill on a cracked plate. The amount was trifling, but Alfonso's grin was bitter and sinister as he parted with all the money he had except a few coins. Out on the dark street he was bumped and pushed aside by drunken rowdies as he went in search for some sort of night's lodging, the uneven cobblestones hurting his tired feet. El Ortina, the peerless one!

At ten o'clock the next morning he finally caught up with Tomas Berumen, as famous for Lisbon sports events as for his pot-belly and little eyes set like shoe-buttons in a red balloon face. The promoter was enjoying his breakfast in the Palacia Hotel when Alfonso laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Ah!" Berumen stayed the fork-speared kidney to his tiny slit of a mouth. "So you turned up! Sit down and join me in a cup of coffee. You look a little peaked. How fares it with you?"

"*Muy bien.*" The aroma of the coffee played havoc with him. He said, "I see you have billed me for the second and fourth *corridas* on Sunday."

"That may be subject to a last-minute change, my *chico.* El Feria from Cadiz is here in case I wish to use him."

"El Feria will cost you sixty thousand."

The shoe-button eyes spun in the merriment of their guile. "No, no, no. Nothing like that, *chico.*"

If he would only remember about the coffee. He hadn't yet motioned to a waiter to bring another cup. There might be a slice of toast as well. An egg—bacon and kidneys—that would be too much to expect—"I have heard that all Lisbon is waiting to see me."

"Sevilla was waiting to see you! Madrid was waiting to see you!"

The reminder was brought down like a sledge hammer. That was to bludgeon out his own terms. It meant, "No promoter in Spain will take another chance on you. So you'd better go down on your knees." Alfonso tried to take it without flinching. He'd been prepared for it. He said, "I didn't want to appear in the arena until I felt at my best again."

Berumen laughed. "That *cornada* you took a year ago did something to you besides rip your guts out, didn't it, *chico?*"

"No, it didn't. It takes a man a little time to get back into his stride after a bad one like that."

"Stride?" Down came the sledge hammer again. "They tell me you *ran* from the arena and didn't stop until you found a rabbit hole somewhere."

Alfonso stood up under the bludgeoning as best he could, his dark eyes fighting back. "I wasn't ready," he defended. "I am now. You'll get your money's worth."

"A vast tub of compassionate blubber. A soft-touch for the down-and-outers, the has-beens, the failures. That's me," Berumen damned himself. He poured more coffee into his cup. "Fifteen thousand *escudos,*" his little fish-mouth said.

From somewhere Alfonso found the determination not to waver. "Thirty thousand. That's a sixth of my regular price."

"I'll go twenty thousand and that's my final offer. Take it or I'll sign El Feria to the contract."

"Nothing less than thirty thousand, senor."

"For what? The repetition of your cowardice in Sevilla and Madrid? There'll be

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forty thousand people on my neck yelling bloody murder—"

"Unless I give a good performance you don't have to pay me a *centimo.*" El Ortina's haggard eyes sought to make this assertion ring true. "I'll agree to such a clause under oath. If I fail to live up to it, the contract is null and void."

The waiter said, "The *torero* El Feria would like a word with you, senor. He is in the lobby."

"Ask him to come in here." He helped himeslf to more kidneys from a silver tureen. "You'd better blow now," he grunted without looking at Alfonso. "I'm sure El Feria won't want to see you. Come to my office in an hour's time."

AS ALFONSO walked through the hotel lobby he saw that he would pass El Feria unless he turned aside which he refused to do. The young *novillero* from Cadiz, like every other bullfighter in Spain, knew of his chicken-hearted behavior in Sevilla and Madrid. Many a badly gored *espada* had been unable to face a fighting bull again. It could happen to any of them. And yet while they were kindly and generous to a washed-up matador, they would pass such a man by with little more than a nod of recognition, sparingly given. To have given anything more would have been Bad Luck.

Alfonso therefore didn't think that "the kid" would exchange a word of greeting with him, although like others he had learned much from the brilliant El Ortina technique in the bullring, having copied the same *media-veronica* and sighted the bull in the very same way, feet glued together, not shifting in the most furious charge.

But the youngster still had his *alternative* in front of him that would earn him the official status of a full-fledged *espada.* He needed good luck, not bad; so it was surprising that he stopped to hold out a friendly hand.

"Some years ago, matador, you paid a few bills of mine in Anteguera. You may have forgotten it. I have not."

Only vaguely did Alfonso recall it. He may indeed have helped this boy as, when he was riding high, he had helped a hundred others, young and old. In Anteguera? He was about to ask for the details of it, but the young *novillero* had walked on in the direction of the breakfast room leaving a hundred *escudos* in the palm of Alfonso's hand. *Ole!* There were some friends in the world after all!

AT TWO o'clock that afternoon he was striding along the Avenida de Liberdade, Lisbon's imposing boulevard, a duly signed contract in his breast pocket attesting that "following the appearance in the Plaza de Toros, this coming Sunday afternoon, as matador scheduled to fight the second and fourth bulls, El Ortina shall be paid the sum of 30,000 *escudos.* . . ."

It felt warm against his heart. It would be warmer still when he added a codicil to it in his own handwriting, making it binding and legal, witnessed by a notary, for whom he was now in search.

A lovely day! Twenty-four hours from now the heralding note of a trumpet would summon him to Eternity, a call he would gladly obey. The fear he had known in Sevilla and Madrid didn't seem to press so heavily upon him, and he thought he knew why. A burden was being lifted from his soul. His step was therefore quick, eager, springy.

Twenty-four more hours of well-being! Alfonso saw himself in the hospital at Barcelona lying helplessly on the complicated mechanism of his bed, strung up on wires and tapes and pulleys so that he must have looked to be still on the horns of the bull. He should have died then!

No hope whatsoever for him, they had said bluntly! He was gone! He had lingered! The last sacrament, how many times? Messages and telegrams from all over Spain and across the seas. For weeks he had not been aware of them. Flowers daily filling his room. He couldn't see them, his eyes closed in pain.

But he could see something else.

In the living hell of his suffering, two pale-blue eyes had been floating above him. For all his shouting, his shrieking, they wouldn't go away. There were different expressions in them. Sometimes they were telling him what had brought about his downfall, what was causing his excruciating agony. Sometimes they had softly accused him of wrong-doing to them. But always they had showed a love passing all

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understanding, a love determined to prevent him from dying.

When this revelation had been borne in on his consciousness Death had released its Fingers and he had been filled with a wondrous quiet. And then, when he had wanted the eyes to stay, they had mysteriously departed, never to appear in that way again.

Instead, something else had taken their place, something more tangible, something he could hold in his hands. Of all the floral tributes sent to him, her few flowers had cost the least, had been purchased for a coin or two in the public marketplace. He always asked for them. Always the nurse read the same simple message attached to them.

"My love and my prayers. Angelina."

Lying there like a rag suspended from a clothes-line he had kept wondering how she managed to exist so far away from home, staying on in Barcelona in order, perhaps, to be near him. He made inquiries, but nobody seemed to know where she could be reached. And, at last, his recovery assured, announced in the public papers throughout the country amidst great celebration, her flowers and little messages had ceased to come. He had nothing more of her, tangible or intangible.

When he had been finally able to leave the hospital, walking again on his feet, a little straighter because of "my love and my prayers," he could find no trace of her in Barcelona. It was as if she had never come there, as though he had merely dreamed he had seen her face in the lower tier of the plaza. Friends of his made inquiries for him in Valencia. She was not living with her mother and father, both of whom were unhappy about her, refusing to give any information as to where she might be, except that she sent them money from Madrid and elsewhere.

He had continued his search until his own troubles exploded on him in Sevilla, all Spain coming to know that he was probably finished as a matador.

He tried to face the horns again in Madrid, his failure there, for all his excuses, even more ignominious. *Espada Acabada!*

Four nights later he was wandering around full to the gills, desperately seeking a comrade who might stand by him. He had staggered his way to a pub on a side street, a hangout for *toreros* more or less in his plight. A look through the steamy and dust-begrimed window—

He had found her!

Seated at a table with two men, the pupils of her eyes seemed unusually enlarged as with belladonna, the laughter on her lips abandoned!

Her blonde hair scintillated in its perfection of wave, her clothes and hat indicating so much expense—why not?—that she was out of place here. And there remained a faint glimmer of the madonna face he had seen when she was engaged to the son of Valencia's leading banker, when she had walked across the floor of a nightclub at his mere beckoning—innocent—unsullied.

A searing pain had plunged up through him, tearing his innards apart like the horn he had taken in Barcelona. He turned away, lurched into the darkness of the street. He himself also was finished—eking out an unwanted life which her prayers had needlessly prolonged. . . .

"I think that arranges it, my dear Senor Ortina." The notary read the appended affidavit aloud. "*In the event of my death this forthcoming Sunday afternoon, the entire value of this contract, here presented, shall become the sole property of Senorita Angelina Destin.*" The notary glanced up over his gold pincenez. "I trust, my dear El Ortina, that no such catastrophe to you will occur. I am looking forward to one of your marvelous performances—"

In the post-office he had written on the manila envelope the inscription, "Senorita Angelina Destin" when it came to him that he wasn't sure of her parents' address in Valencia. It was *Calle Baca* or *Raca,* and he had no idea of the street number. The *cantina* in Madrid? No, that wouldn't do.

And then the mailing of a legacy *before* his death was the notion of a lunatic. He might not be killed! Possibly the thing to do under the circumstances was to carry the envelope on his person, right into the bull-ring. It would be found on his body. His wishes would be carried out.

He wrote on the envelope, "To be delivered into the senorita's own hands. Kindly make every effort to find her. Alfonso Ortina."

Sealing the flap with wax, registering the letter in her name, he walked down the

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street. A familiarly-croaking voice hailed him. He turned, looked around.

Diestro! His valet since the day he won the right to be called *espada!* He was getting on in years now, his face like a walnut shell that had been dented. Diestro! They embraced one another in a paroxysm of discovery.

"Fonsito!" It was the beloved diminutive of his name, and ready tears ran down Diestro's corrugated visage. "We have been looking everywhere for you. Where have you been hiding? We asked Tomas Berumen. He said he had no inkling of where you were lodged."

"*Chico*—but I am glad to see you again." For no reason at all he was in a laughing mood. "You must attend to me tomorrow afternoon—help me prepare. I have no money to pay you beyond a few *escudos. Hola!* I am overcome to see you."

"Money! Did I ever ask you for money? My attendance on you is wealth! Juan Camblas also will serve you for the honor of it. *Ole,* he will be so happy to see you!"

"Is Juanito here?"

"Here? With you billed for a *corrida?* He is shedding his tears into a glass of manzanilla. Let us go at once."

THEY hurried on, turned down a side street, entered a fifth-rate *cantina.* Here a tall and spare individual certainly seemed to be shedding tears into an empty glass. Juan Camblas, the well-known *picador,* fifty years if he was a day! When he rode into the arena astride a nag as gaunt as he was himself, his *pic* pointing to the sun, he was Don Quixote himself, resurrected, about to tilt at one of his windmills. The spectators called him "old Quix."

"Fonsito!" he squeaked. "For two days we search all over Lisbon for you!"

More embracing, Alfonso's white teeth showing in happy laughter. Ah, but it was warming to be with faithful old servants once more! "There is the El Ortina light in your eyes," Old Quix cried. "I prophesy you will fight like old times tomorrow. For once in their lives these Lisbonites will see a *real* matador."

Not a word about Sevilla or Madrid! Both of them had seen him turn tail in a display of green funk that must have added to their gray hairs. He had not found the courage even to walk out into the arena! Another *espada* had had to take his place! No, not a word about that! Nothing from these old ancients save praise for his courage and skill which everyone would see on the morrow.

"Yes," Alfonso promised, "they will see." He had not felt so gay for years. "Come, my friends, let us have wine. We must drink to this occasion." He called loudly for a waiter.

"Ah!" Juan Camblas said. "That strutting, big-bottomed Castilian!" He was speaking of Manuelo Cortez, the rival matador for the Sunday *corrida.* "You will show him up, I promise you, my Fonsito."

The valet Diestro agreed. "That rampaging boar! He is good with the sword, yes. But his work with the cape! You will make him look like a circus elephant in there. The people will laugh at him. Ah, yes—that reminds me of something that might interest you, *espada*—although it is so long ago that by this time, you may have forgotten her."

The manzanilla had been poured and Alfonso gaily lifted his glass to drink. "Forgotten whom?" he asked.

"Angelina Destin."

A little of the sherry spilled. "Angelina?" he tried to say lightly. "Why—what about her?"

"She is here in Lisbon. I saw her only this morning. She is here with the braggart of a Cortez, both of them staying at the Palacia Hotel. Your old flame," the valet said with kindly and teasing intent. "I must say that she looked no more than eighteen again when we first saw her. You remember," he winked. "Valencia. The Blue Grotto. Ah! There was a sight of one of Heaven's angels. Well, she's as lovely as ever," he raved on. "But, by God, it turned my stomach to see her with Manuelo Cortez!"

At that moment Alfonso was conscious only of the envelope in his breast pocket. It mocked him. He wanted to reach for it, tear it in pieces and throw them on the floor.

"What is the matter, *espada?*"

"Matter? Why do you ask?"

"Has my news disturbed you? If so, I am very sorry. Is it—because of Angelina?"

"No, *chico.* I have long since forgotten

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her. Why should I care if she runs around with Cortez." His voice was bitter.

"Aah, don't listen to Diestro's yap!" Juan Camblas said, his eyes discerning jealousy. "She wouldn't have anything to do with Cortez. I hear that every time he asks her to marry him she laughs in his face."

Alfonso had lapsed into silence, his gay spirits suddenly gone, his dark eyes haggard. He was thinking of a *cantina* in Madrid when he had glanced through a grimy window and seen two men and a woman —her cheeks drawn—her eyes fey. . . .

The Sunday afternoon was perfect, a cloudless sky trying to reflect its blue in the debris-strewn River Tagus. Down at the waterfronts, in and around the Export Line offices, were Jewish refugees, head upon head by the thousands, trying and hoping and waiting to get to Palestine or the U. S. A. Bands of ragged Portuguese children gathered on the street curbs watching more fortunate grown-ups eating in the restaurants; pinched little faces begging for scraps, some of them in such a state of malnutrition they could scarcely move to pick up bits of *langusta*, a mere bit of lobster shell which might be tossed carelessly from the table.

After such a fashion of subsistence El Ortina had eked out his childhood in Zaragoza, but today he was dressed in snuff-colored silk breeches and gold-threaded *traje*, his thick black hair shining with brilliantine, combed into cow-licks over his forehead and temples. Diestro had dressed him with loving care, putting pieces of cotton wool between his toes, covering the soles and upper part of the feet with soft linen, sewed together smoothly to insure safe footing.

He was alone now in the dimly-lighted chapel of the Plaza de Toros, the strings of his heart and mind slowly tightening as he said his prayers, nervousness showing in the lines of his young-old face. There was much for him to pray for, yet he felt it might be sacrilege to light a candle for himself.

Rising from his knees, he genuflected, then walked up the aisle only to pause in further reflection. He turned back, went to the statue of St. Anthony, dropped a coin in the box and lighted a candle for a safety and well-being of someone whose name was written on a manila envelope which he carried in the pocket of his resplendent costume.

Not long afterward, from behind his barrier and before a massive crowd, he watched his rival Manuelo Cortez kill efficiently for all his awkwardness with the *muleta*. The Castilian had something which the more gracefully-proportioned El Ortina lacked: utter fearlessness. Beyond a gruffly exchanged *"Buenos dias"* the two matadors hadn't spoken, and Alfonso watched him with a brooding face, glad that he hadn't been called upon to take him out of difficulties.

Well—here it was!

He was surprised by the tremendous acclaim greeting the mention of his name over the loudspeakers. In acknowledgment he took a few steps into the arena and waved his hat. The reception tended to calm him a little, and as the bull rushed out from the *toril* he observed the animal almost in pleasurable contemplation of the duel that lay ahead. Watching intently, he studied the bull's manner of attack as the several *toreros* went through their initial maneuvers to let him see the hook of the horns and which horn to fear the most.

Camblas, "Old Quix," placed his pic accurately into the powerful neck muscles of the bull, though one of the other picadors went down, man and horse, under a savage charge. It might well have resulted in a fatality, except that the bull was too eager to gore the man on the ground, driving its nose into the sand.

NOW for the first time El Ortina was called upon to show what he could do under the circumstances of a dangerous *quite*. Resigned to whatever fate awaited him, his body not tightened up, only a light ripple of fear playing over him, he ran out there and worked with speed. The picador lay flat, his only recourse to save his life, and El Ortina at once took the frustrated animal away with the cape, enabling the man to escape.

In that first minute of combat all his nervousness evaporated out of him. Once again, after what seemed a lifetime of blackness, he felt the elixir of complete assurance in himself. Having sought Death, resigned himself to It, he was no longer afraid of It.

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With a tantalizing flicker of the cape he invited a direct attack. As the bull tore in, going for the cloth, taking it to be part of the man, El Ortina advanced to meet the charge. As the animal's head went down for the toss, the horns were passed, close in, with a step aside in a series of *veronicas,* first a step to the right, the next time to the left, five passes in all.

He followed with three perfectly-executed *media-veronicas* in succession, turning the bull helplessly in its own stride, and the thousands shrieked; for this was matchless domination of the bull at such close quarters that the left then the right horn passed across the matador's stomach while his feet were nailed, as it were, to the ground. Here was perfect timing with the cape, reckless daring, and forty thousand men and women cheered him as he turned his back on the bewildered animal and casually walked away to his *berrara.*

There his valet Diestro embraced and kissed him. "At your best, my Fonsito! Didn't I say that you would again reach the very heights of your work! Listen to them cheering!"

"*Gracias, chico.* Give me of water to drink."

After the *banderillas* had placed their festooned darts in the neck, the trumpet high in the columns again called him to the arena, this time to be alone with the bull. Casting his hat behind him in the traditional manner, he walked out there to meet a red monument of a creature transfixed in the center of the ring, watching with robin eyes, drops of blood dripping to closely-placed hoofs.

El Ortina took a very compromising position. Prepared to meet the first charge, he stood slightly to the right of the bull. It was audacious, considering the animal's tendency to hook to its left.

He stood absolutely still, barely quivering the *muleta,* sighting at a distance of some twenty feet. The bull was planted, breathing hard through the nostrils. It was a moment of intense silence. Everybody could hear the challenge.

"*Toro! Toro!*"

The head went down, the dainty hoofs pawed, the attack began. *El Toro* came straight as if on rails, gathering speed. The man didn't move. With the *ayudado por alto* that was breathless he passed the bull making it turn on its feet.

The huge crowd screamed. Again the attack, twice in succession. Both times El Ortina contrived that the murderous horns passed in front of his chest, both times with his feet together, seemingly glued to the ground, each dazzling feint followed by frenzied roaring. The tall slender *espada* was performing with his waist a hollow for the horns to attempt entry. Now on the third charge with the left horn apparently about to catch, El Ortina pulled the other horn with his left hand so as to cause the *muleta* to be twisted around the bull's curly head. Confused, maddened, the bull backed away, saliva dripping from an open and crimson mouth.

"*Toro!* Come *Toro!*"

Infuriated, the bull came in, tossing to the left. El Ortina went in over the horns, close to the curly head, driving the sword true, his life depending on the split-second timing of the *muleta.* Exactly placed, the sword went to the hilt, El Ortina coming down from the tips of his feet. Then the Belmonte pose! The bull collapsed, and with hands at his sides the gaunt-faced *espada* bowed over the horns, his own head lowered in the presence of death.

BREAKING like thunder, the applause was sustained as he walked on slightly shaky legs back to the barrier. In the noise it was difficult for him to hear what Diestro was saying to him. Water! He needed a mouthful of water! The ancient had a folded note in his paw. He was so excited that with his wrinkled face and questing shiny-black eyes he resembled a jabbering marmoset. Alfonso took the note from his hand, opened it.

"The rumored occurrences at Sevilla and Madrid could not possibly have happened. *For El Ortina was not there.* After Barcelona he didn't appear again in the arena until this afternoon in Lisbon. He was incomparable, his artistry flawless. I am so glad for you. I would so like to congratulate you in person. If you permit it, Diestro will bring you to where I am waiting. If not, I will understand. A. D."

The pencil writing was almost indecipherable and its quality of emotion tended to break him in two.

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No, he wouldn't go to meet her! Point-blank he refused to see her! That last glimpse of her in a Madrid *cantina* was enough to torment him as long as he lived —and that would be only another hour or so. No! Her wan cheeks, the accusing look in her eyes, would not take this final feeling of elation away from him! No, he would stay where he was, hidden in the pit of the *barrera*, parched of throat!

And then he was blindly following Diestro through the tunnel under the bank of the arena. He would tell her of his anguish in the hospital at Barcelona, of his agonized thoughts there, of her few daily roses, the prayers in her eyes. He would ask her forgiveness and give her the letter he carried in the pocket of his costume, the letter she was not to open until—until he—

Diestro had ghosted away and she was standing just outside the entrance to the chapel. She was dressed in a blue tailored suit that became her exceedingly, a blue beret aslant her blonde hair. The bloom of her was as he had first seen it long ago in Valencia!

HE MERELY stood there in front of her, unable to say a word. Distantly, faintly, he could hear the roar of the crowd from the arena.

She said nervously, her lips visibly trembling, "I won't keep you more than a moment. I didn't believe you would come, but I took a chance on it—hoping for a professional interview."

The words puzzled him. "Interview?"

"I hope you are not going to say you've never read my syndicated column? I write under the name of Torita. Dear me, I thought I was almost as famous as you are." She was laughing, her tone bantering.

Torita! The column touching upon Spain's age-old national event. Yes, he had read it here and there, even before his *cornada* at Barcelona. Interviews with past and present idols of the bullring, excepting himself.

He stared unbelievingly at her. "A newspaperwoman?"

"For the past two years now—and I love it. The human interest side of bull-fighting. I attend all the *corridas*, but I am more concerned in the private lives of our *toreros*. I go into their homes, meet their wives, their families. I sit for hours in wretched *cantinas* talking with men whose day in the arena has come to an end. Tomorrow, I am going to write about you—of your boyhood in Zaragoza when you almost starved to death—of your *novillada*—your great triumphs—of the Countess Indalecio—Mercedes—Lupita the dancer—" Pausing for an instant she said, "You're thinner."

She was different. She was pert, spicy, assured of herself.

He almost shouted at her. "Cortez?"

"Ah, yes. I've written about him—and not very much to his credit, I'm afraid. The great Castilian, Manuelo Cortez! He doesn't belong in the same ring with you. It's an insult," she laughed, then the laughter faded from her lips. "You have suffered, haven't you, Alfonso?"

"What of it?"

She said gently, "It's written in your face, in your eyes, far beyond the power of any writer to describe." Her tone brightened. "But that's over and done with now. You've found yourself again. No," she amended, "that's not the way to put it. You've found a new Alfonso Ortina. You'll go on from now to a greater fame in your profession—in your life—to even greater triumphs—" Her voice broke. "Oh, I haven't the remotest idea of what I am saying. I'm talking just for the sake of talking. It's—it's seeing you again, I expect. It's knowing what you went through at Barcelona and Sevilla and Madrid when you couldn't leave the *barrera*. And now, today, the magnificent way you reached back for your courage again—"

Once more he shouted at her. "Cortez? What does he mean to you?"

Her eyes closed. "What *could* he mean?"

"Answer me." He went nearer to her, gripped her arm.

"Only you," she said. "No other man but you. There couldn't be—"

Fiercely he threw his arms about her, straining her to him, kissing her lips. He knew, now, that he had indeed conquered himself as he had conquered his fear. The grinning visage of Death had melted away. By some miracle he had found truth and love and a happiness he had never before known.

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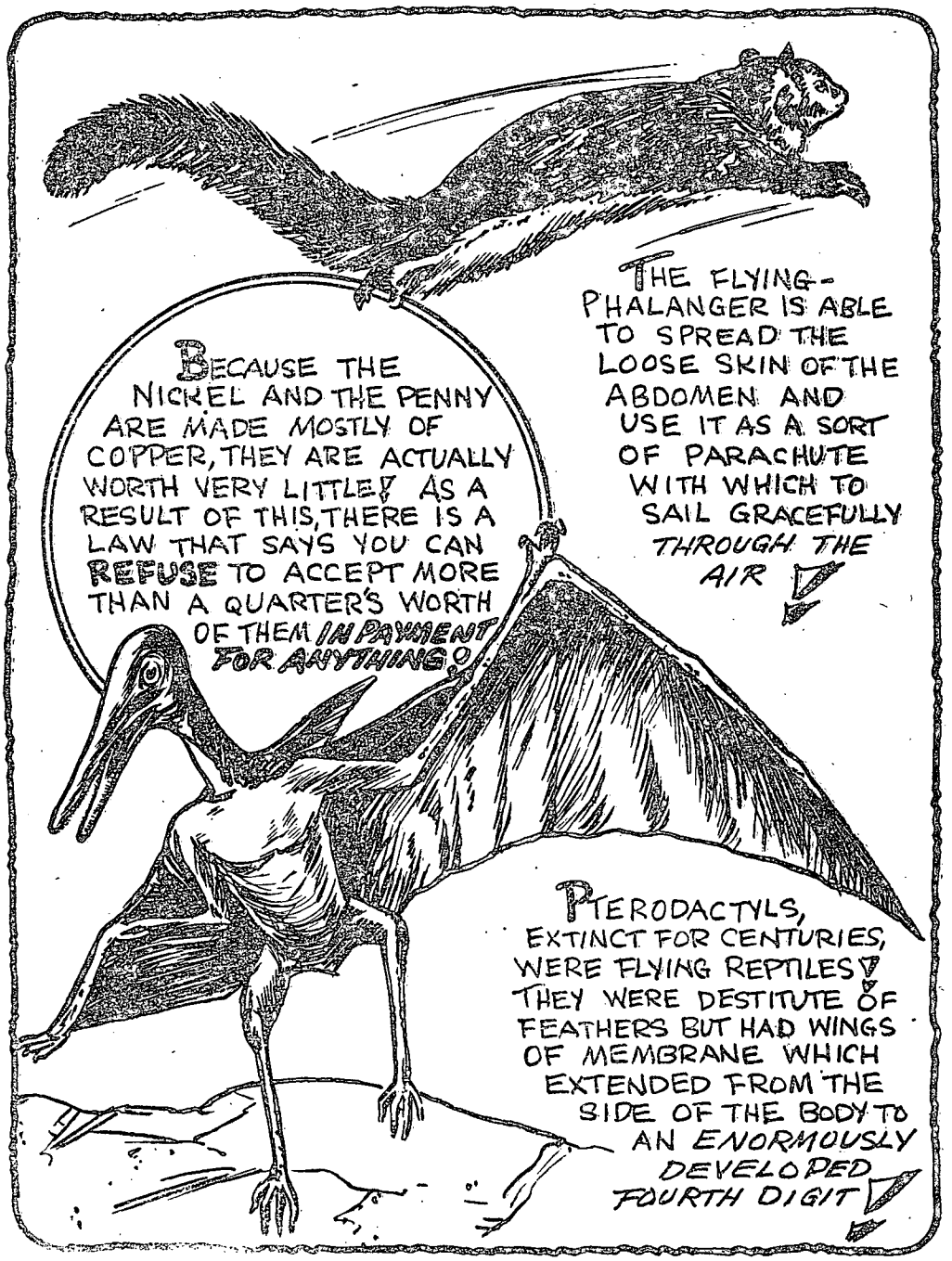
THE FLYING-PHALANGER IS ABLE TO SPREAD THE LOOSE SKIN OF THE ABDOMEN AND USE IT AS A SORT OF PARACHUTE WITH WHICH TO SAIL GRACEFULLY THROUGH THE AIR
BECAUSE THE NICKEL AND THE PENNY ARE MADE MOSTLY OF COPPER, THEY ARE ACTUALLY WORTH VERY LITTLE! AS A RESULT OF THIS, THERE IS A LAW THAT SAYS YOU CAN REFUSE TO ACCEPT MORE THAN A QUARTER'S WORTH OF THEM IN PAYMENT FOR ANYTHING!
PTERODACTYLS, EXTINCT FOR CENTURIES, WERE FLYING REPTILES! THEY WERE DESTITUTE OF FEATHERS BUT HAD WINGS OF MEMBRANE WHICH EXTENDED FROM THE SIDE OF THE BODY TO AN ENORMOUSLY DEVELOPED FOURTH DIGIT

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A Fine Thing When a Young Man Is Ordered Away from a Man's Daughter—and Then the Same Father Tries to Hire His Services as a Detective!

By PHILIP KETCHUM

EDGED IN RED

I

I HATED him. I hated him for his self-importance. I hated him for the patronizing attitude he used with others, and for his sanctimonious manner of speech. I hated him because of the stubborn, pig-headed blindness which sometimes ruled him, because of his domineering way with those he considered beneath him, and because of the pseudo-patriotism with which he cloaked himself. I hated him most of all because of the clever way he had come between me and his daughter, Carol.

Here he was, this afternoon, in my office. He had come here because he needed help. How he had the nerve to appeal to me I don't know. Perhaps it was the normal thing for him to do. As a private investigator I wasn't good enough for his daughter but I

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could still be hired to pull his chestnuts out of the fire. I wasn't so sure of that as he might have been. I waited grimly to hear what he had to say.

He cleared his throat, the famous throat of Jethro Van Tyne from which had burst the polemics to confound many a Congressional committee. He ran his stubby fingers through the bushy, white hair which helped to give him such an air of distinction. He leaned forward. He said, "Hubbard, I have come to you about a very confidential matter. Sometime ago I found it advisable to look into your record. What I learned indicated that you are a man who can be trusted."

This was probably supposed to make me get down on my knees and lick his boots. A compliment from Jethro Van Tyne was something to write home about. I managed a grunt. That was all.

"I can trust you, can't I?" said Jethro Van Tyne.

"A week ago a woman asked me almost the same question," I answered. "She was sitting in the chair you are sitting in. She had come here directly after cutting her husband's throat from ear to ear. She wanted me to find the other woman in her husband's life. She wanted me to establish his infidelity as a justification for what she had done. She went from here to jail."

Van Tyne shrugged his shoulders. I don't believe he even heard me. To a man like Jethro Van Tyne, problems in which he was not interested, were not important.

"Hubbard," he said, "have you ever heard of Arthur Kesselring?"

I shook my head. The name meant nothing to me.

"Kesselring is a man of about forty," Van Tyne continued. "He is undoubtedly an American, but even the F. B. I. has no definite, factual information as to his early background. When I first heard of him he was in Shanghai. This was just before Pearl Harbor. He had been arrested by the Brit-

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ish. He was charged with being a Nazi agent. He had in his possession, when he was arrested, several letters signed by my name. They contained very confidential information. They were letters I am sure I had never written. They were to be sent to Washington for examination, but the plane carrying them was lost."

I nodded but made no comment. This was starting out in a very interesting manner. Jethro Van Tyne had been in government service several years before Pearl Harbor. He had resigned rather abruptly just after the Normandy invasion. No hint of scandal had been indicated. According to all the stories I had heard, his doctors had insisted that he take a long rest.

"I may as well tell you," Van Tyne was saying, "that the British definitely established the fact that Kesselring was a Nazi agent. He was sentenced to be executed, but he escaped. He next turned up in Moscow where he used a letter supposedly from me, to serve as an introduction to our ambassador. He kept this letter. Kesselring was later reported in Berlin. There is evidence that he spent some time in Spain and in France. He was in Cairo for a while and when the war ended, he was in Tokyo. He dropped out of sight before he could be apprehended. How he made it to this country, I don't know. But he's here, Hubbard. I had a telephone call from him yesterday. He's here in San Francisco."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Why not report it to the F. B. I.?"

"In the end, that's what I may do, but I want to see those letters, Hubbard. He told me over the telephone that he had managed to save a few. He offered to sell them to me."

"If you didn't write them," I said. "Why worry."

Van Tyne got to his feet. He walked over to the window and stared out into the gray, dismal fog of the late afternoon. He was a tall man. He usually stood erect but right now his shoulders were hunched. He seemed tired and old.

"I'll have a hard time explaining this to you, Hubbard," he said slowly. "The letters the British took from Kesselring contained information known only to a few others besides myself. Those letters, which I didn't write, forced my resignation from government service. I want to get my hands on one of them, no matter what it costs. They were typewritten. I have samples of the typing and the touch of everyone who could have written them. I want to satisfy myself as to who is guilty. The F. B. I. could do this, I know, but I would much rather do it myself. I've got to, Hubbard; it's my job to do it. I want to point out the guilty person, myself, no matter who it is."

Van Tyne sounded desperate. I could see three possible reasons for this. He might be guilty of writing the letters himself. Or perhaps he thought he knew who was guilty and wanted to protect someone. Or he could, of course, be motivated by the high purpose of making sure the guilty person suffered. I marked off that possibility at once.

"You could meet him and buy the letters," I said dryly.

Van Tyne turned to face me. He shook his head. "I want you to do it for me, Hubbard. I have had no experience in dealing with men like Kesselring. I want to keep out of the picture until I know, positively, who wrote the letters. I'm not asking you to hide anything. I'm not asking you to do anything dishonest. I merely want you to represent me in what might be called a business transaction."

I lit a cigarette. I didn't answer right away, but I knew what my answer would be. I would do it. I would do it, not for Van Tyne or for the fee he might offer. I would do it because even though I hated this man, he was Carol's father, and it looked to me as though he was involved in a nasty mess. Besides, his story interested me. Maybe this was just blackmail, but it was at least a little out of the ordinary.

VAN TYNE came up to my desk. He placed ten bills on its not-too-polished surface. Each was for a thousand dollars. "This should be sufficient for at least one sample letter," he told me. "Maybe it will buy them all. Make the best bargain you can. Arthur Kesselring will expect you at nine, tonight. He will be in apartment 307 at the Don Ramon on Fulton Street."

"How will I know him?" I asked.

"He is short, stocky. He has light hair. On his upper right arm there is a tattooed, green serpent and below it the letters

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'B.T.' This information we secured from the British. The significance of the serpent and the letters is not known."

I put the money in my pocket. I knew the location of the Don Ramon apartments. The identification of Kesselring should not be too difficult. I asked Van Tyne several questions about the letters but his answers were vague. He gave me a sample of his signature. He told me he appreciated what I was doing. A heavy load seemed to have fallen from his shoulders.

"How is Carol?" I asked bluntly.

Van Tyne bit his lips. He looked toward the window. "She is fine."

"Is she still in Europe?"

"She returned home a week ago."

Van Tyne hadn't wanted to say that. The words came hard. It was my turn, now to stare toward the window. I hoped my face didn't betray the sharp excitement I was feeling. Almost a year had passed since I had seen Carol Van Tyne. A great deal can happen in a year. Perhaps what Van Tyne had hoped would happen had been accomplished.

"She was quite tired when she got home," Van Tyne was saying. "She has been resting. I had been planning to ask you out to dinner in a few days. You may not appreciate what I did, Hubbard, but my reasoning was sound. I am firmly opposed to hasty and ill-considered marriages."

I could have slapped a bitter answer at Jethro Van Tyne. A dozen years before, Van Tyne, then a widower, had married a New York actress after a whirlwind courtship which had run for exactly ten days. He was still married to her.

"I am very fond of my daughter," said Jethro Van Tyne. "I wanted her to have a year to think things over. When you are a father you will understand."

This was about all I could take. In another minute if Van Tyne went on talking, I would throw him out of the office. Carol was twenty-four. She was sensible, level-headed. She was emotionally as mature as her father. Van Tyne was being fair to neither of us. I got to my feet. "I'll see Kesselring for you," I said bruskly. "After I've talked to him I'll telephone you. Is that satisfactory?"

Van Tyne nodded. He turned toward the door. He didn't offer to shake hands.

I SAT in a bar on Fulton Street not far from the Don Ramon apartments. I had a second drink to wipe out the raw taste of the first. I tried to do a little constructive thinking about Jethro Van Tyne and Kesselring and the letters Van Tyne said he hadn't written. It was impossible. Carol kept intruding. Carol was back. In a few days, at most, I would see her.

The clock over the bar pointed to 8:55. I shoved Carol out of my thoughts. I had ten thousand dollars in my pocket. Up the street in the possession of a man named Kesselring, were some letters I was supposed to buy. I paid for my drinks, left the bar and headed up the street through the gray, wet fog toward the Don Ramon apartments.

A man was leaving the apartment house as I got there so I didn't have to buzz to get in. I took the automatic elevator to the third floor. Down the hall was 307. The name-plate above the bell read Evelyn Dalhart. The name of Arthur Kesselring was not listed. I wondered, casually, about Evelyn Dalhart and her relationship to Kesselring. I rang the bell.

There was no immediate answer. I rang it again and then knocked on the door. There still was no answer. After a moment I turned the door knob and pushed. The door was unlocked. It swung open and I understood, immediately, why Arthur Kesselring hadn't admitted me. He was lying on the floor in front of a tufted, beige davenport. The top of his head was crushed in.

The lights were on. A cheap radio in the corner was sounding off with a corny, hill-billy song. There was the faint, elusive odor of an expensive perfume in the air. I stepped in and closed the door. This was what is known as a single apartment. It consisted only of this room, an alcove kitchenette and a bath. The closet space was an extension of the wall area into which the bed folded. There were few places where anyone could have hidden. There seemed to be no one here but the dead man.

The hill-billy song came to an end. A radio announcer started talking about where you could buy the finest used cars in town. I crossed to the radio and clicked it off. I stared down at Arthur Kesselring who had played his dangerous game across Asia and

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Europe and back again in the tense years of the war and who had come to a sudden and inglorious end in a quiet San Francisco apartment house.

"Pete," said a voice behind me. "Pete, I couldn't find them."

I jerked around. Carol Van Tyne stood in the bathroom door. I stared at her, wide-eyed. I tried to speak but I couldn't get any words past the lump which had jumped into my throat. Carol looked just as I remembered her, just as I had hoped she would look when I saw her again. She wasn't smiling, but her smile was all that was missing.

"I couldn't find them, Pete," she said again. "I've looked everywhere."

"You couldn't find what?" I heard myself asking.

"The letters," said Carol. "The letters he wanted to sell."

I mopped a hand over my face. I had dreamed of taking Carol in my arms when I saw her again. Instead, I just stood there, looking at her. Carol is slender, small. She doesn't seem husky but she could beat me at golf and out-distance me in swimming. I was remembering that as I stood there. It hadn't taken a great deal of strength to smash in Kesselring's skull.

A sudden, brief smile came to Carol's lips. She said, "Hello, Pete."

Those two words were so natural, so friendly, so real, that every suspicion I had was swept away. I said, "Hello, Carol," and stepped forward, holding out my arms.

Carol met me half way. I couldn't have wanted a more satisfactory kiss. It wasn't necessary, now, to ask if the past year had accomplished what Jethro Van Tyne had planned. It hadn't. So far as Carol and I were concerned, things were just as they had been twelve months before.

Carol drew away. She said, "Pete, did you hear me? I haven't been able to find them."

This jarred me back to the present. I had things to do. I had to get the letters if they were here. I had to get Carol away. I had to notify the police of Kesselring's death and either duck out myself or invent a good story to protect Carol's father.

"When did you get here?" I asked bluntly.

"Half an hour ago," Carol answered.

"Kesselring was like—like that?"

"Of course, Pete. You don't think—"

I was shaking my head. Carol hadn't killed him. I had been crazy to even think of it.

"How did you happen to know about the letters?" I asked her.

"I've known of them for a long time," Carol told me. "Almost from the time Dad knew of them."

"How did you happen to come here tonight?"

Carol was frowning. She was biting her lips.

"I've got to know, Carol," I said slowly. "I've got to be able to figure every angle. The police may not identify Kesselring, may not tie him to your father, but if they do and if you are involved, you are going to have your answers ready."

CAROL nodded. "I knew Kesselring was in town three days ago," she answered. "I knew he was demanding money of Dad. I didn't think Dad would pay. I asked Dad to see you but he refused, and reminded me of my promise not to see you for a year. I have a little money of my own. I drew it from the bank and came here to see if I could buy the letters. That's about all there is to tell, Pete. Kesselring didn't answer the door. I pushed on it. The door was unlatched. I came in. I've hunted for the letters but they are not here."

"Why did you want to buy them, Carol?"

A flush of color came into the girl's face. "For a while," she said, and her voice was almost a whisper, "Edward worked for father. Of course it isn't possible, but—"

She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't have to. Edward was her brother. He was a pretty worthless young man. He had been involved in several ugly scandals. He was nothing at all like Carol.

"Is that what your father is afraid of?" I suggested.

"I think so, Pete. But I think we are both wrong."

"Where is your car?"

"Just around the corner."

I led Carol to the door. I hated to send her away but it was the sensible thing to do. "Drive back home," I told her. "Don't say anything to anyone. If the letters are here, I'll get them."

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As soon as Carol was gone I telephoned Jethro Van Tyne. I got through to his home but Van Tyne wasn't in. I didn't leave any number. In the hour which followed I took the place apart and put it back together again. I didn't find the Kesselring letters. I didn't even learn much about Evelyn Dalhart.

At ten-thirty I had a cigarette and thought things over. Evelyn Dalhart hadn't appeared. No one else had come to the apartment. The telephone hadn't rung. Perhaps Evelyn was away. Perhaps she had sublet this apartment. If so, it might be a week or more before Kesselring's body was found. This, however, wouldn't give Carol a break. The police, whenever they got here, would case the apartment for fingerprints. Somewhere, they would find Carol's. Her fingerprints were on record with the F. B. I. because of her government service.

What was in my mind was inexcusable for a man who tried to play square with the police. Nevertheless, I shouldered Kesselring's body, headed for the automatic elevator, and rode it to the basement. I carried Kesselring out the back door and left his body lying in the alley, close to a cross street where he might have fallen after a scuffle with a hold-up man. I had stripped his pockets.

II

SAN FRANCISCO looked the same in the morning as it had the morning before. The fog was still in. The air was moist and cold. I reached the office a little after nine. I was riding an undercurrent of excitement. Carol was home. I had seen her, talked to her, kissed her. The scandal which had been hovering over Jethro Van Tyne was about to break. I had carried a dead man from the place where he had been killed to an alley and had left him there, thus placing one Pete Hubbard in a rather precarious position so far as the future was concerned.

Mrs. Applegate, (that is honestly her name) greeted me with her usual charming smile. Mrs. Applegate is the world's most efficient private secretary, receptionist, bookkeeper and office girl. She is hopelessly underpaid. Why she stays with me is a mystery to all those who have tried to charm her away. I have a theory about it. Mrs. Applegate is a voracious reader of detective stories. So long as she works with me she pictures herself as another Della Street. When I get stuck on a case she is always ready with a suggestion as to what Perry Mason would do. Or Philip Marlow. Or Ellery Queen. I am sadly afraid I don't measure up to her expectations but she still has hopes.

"I have made two appointments for you, Mr. Hubbard," said Mrs. Applegate. "At ten o'clock, Mrs. Selma Oleta Van Tyne will be in to see you."

I nodded. Selma Oleta Van Tyne was Jethro Van Tyne's wife, the former actress whom he had married a dozen years before.

"Your second appointment," said Mrs. Applegate, "is with Mr. Roger Cozad at ten-thirty. Mr. Cozard is with the Federal Bureau of Investigation." She leaned forward. "A G-man," she whispered.

I grinned at her and moved on toward my private office.

"Shall I take recordings?" asked Mrs. Applegate.

There is a hidden mike on my desk which is connected to a device for recording conversations. Mrs. Applegate operates it by means of a switch at her desk. These recordings sometimes come in handy. They are also a deterrent to profanity on my part. I hated to disappoint Mrs. Applegate but I shook my head. "No recordings unless I signal."

CAROL'S stepmother was probably close to forty. She looked younger. She was slender, neatly groomed. She had dark eyes. Her hair was jet black. With a dark veil and carmined lips she could pour on the glamor. She had the figure for it, the little mannerisms which are helpful, a deep, throaty voire and an almost provocative smile.

I didn't know much about Selma's relationship to Carol. It was my impression that they had worked out some kind of armed truce. Carol didn't talk freely of her stepmother. She loved her father. She probably got along with Selma because Selma was her father's wife. At least that was the way I figured it.

Selma smiled and gave me her hand as she came in. Her fingers were cold. She

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sat comfortably in the chair her husband had occupied the afternoon before. She didn't cross her legs. This, definitely, was not the time; I was the man who was interested in Carol.

"She is back, Mr. Hubbard," said Selma Van Tyne. "Did my husband tell you?"

I nodded. I didn't say anything. I wanted to see what was coming next.

"I didn't agree with Jethro when he insisted that you and Carol wait for a year before getting married," Selma continued. "It was Carol, herself, who gave in. Jethro insisted on it. He can be very stubborn. The year, of course, is almost over. It is Jethro's suggestion that you spend the next week-end with us. That is, if you want to."

"I should like to very much," I answered.

"Perhaps," said Selma, "my husband has already invited you."

I shook my head. "He was here on another matter."

This was what Selma wanted to know. I could read it in her eyes, in the slight frown which came to her face. She opened her bag and reached for a cigarette. It was my guess that she was wondering how to frame her next question. I decided to help her.

"Your husband came to see me about the Kesselring affair." I said quietly.

Selma pulled on her cigarette. She was still frowning. She stared at the floor. "Did you?" she asked. "That is, were you able to see Mr. Kesslering?"

I shook my head. "No one answered the door when I knocked."

Selma Van Tyne nibbled at her beautifully carmined lips. She was still staring at the floor. "I hope you haven't given up," she said slowly. "Those letters are awfully important to Jethro. They have hung over him for years."

I managed a smile. I said I hadn't give up. Selma smiled back at me. She stood up. She gave me her hand once more and there was a friendly pressure in her fingers. "We will expect you Friday, Mr. Hubbard," she told me. "Come as early as you can."

That was that. Selma drifted to the door. There is no other way to describe her walk. She threw me another smile and left. She left me with the feeling that we had been reading lines in a play, but that was typical of Selma as I remembered her. She was an unreal person. She had never quit being an actress.

ROGER COZAD arrived sharply at eleven. He was newly assigned to this district. I hadn't met him before. He was near my own age. Thirty. He was tall, slender, sun-tanned. He had a nice smile.

"I'll come right to the point, Hubbard," he said bluntly. "They tell me you are honest. They tell me you play square with the police. I hope you do. Jethro Van Tyne came to see you yesterday. Did he, by any chance, mention Arthur Kesselring?"

I had been half prepared for something like this. I didn't want to lie to a federal operative, but I was in too deep to do anything else.

"Van Tyne came to see me because of his daughter," I answered. "He has stood between us for a year. Carol is home again. I have been invited to their place down on the peninsula for the week-end."

Cozad looked surprised. I explained things more fully. "You can check on it," I added. "Carol and I even made Winchell's column last year."

This raised a chuckle. Cozad relaxed. He lit a cigarette.

"I have heard of Kesselring," I mentioned. "What's new in the picture?"

"Kesselring is in this country," the F. B. I. man reported. "He is in San Francisco, or at least he was a week ago. A merchant seaman was murdered in a water-front hotel just off the Embarcadero. Some of the fingerprints found in his room, checked with Kesselring's classification. We don't know that Kesselring murdered the seaman, but we think he did. We want him, of course, for questioning in relation to his war-time record. We have felt there was a chance he might have contacted Van Tyne in an effort to raise money. Blackmail. We have been watching Van Tyne. When Van Tyne came to see you we thought we were on the right track."

I managed a laugh. I think it was a good one. "How would it be," I suggested, "if I did a little probing around during the week-end?"

"Any help you can give us, said Cozad, "we can use. We really want this man Kesselring."

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I walked with Cozad to the door. I shook hands with him and watched him leave. I had crawled out from under this all right. Temporarily, that is. There was a chance I had been followed the night before. If I had been, as soon as Kesselring's body was identified the police would be after me in a hurry. I didn't feel any too happy as I walked back to my desk.

THE morning newspapers hadn't carried a line about Kesselring. In the afternoon newspapers there was a box story on page one which reported the discovery of the body of an unidentified man in an alley just off Fulton. According to the police, the man had apparently been held-up, robbed, and then slugged.

I stayed away from the office during the afternoon. I didn't want to be available for another interview with the F. B. I. after Kesselring had been identified. A friend at the *Chronicle* showed me what they had in the newspaper morgue on Jethro Van Tyne. There was no hint of the Kesselring affair in any of the clippings. There was a good deal about Van Tyne's war work and his whirlwind courtship of Selma Oleta Cawthorne. One picture of Selma in an oriental costume, was a honey. She hadn't been a top-flight actress. The chorus was more in her line. Later, I checked on Evelyn Dalhart, who was a salesgirl at the Emporium. This fact I had learned while searching her apartment. She was on the job. Her record at the Emporium was good. A woman from the personnel department pointed her out to me. I followed Evelyn when she left the store. She went home. On the way, she bought some stuff at a grocery store.

I gave her until eight o'clock that night to eat dinner and decide whether or not she was going to stay in. At eight-fifteen I rang the bell at her door.

She answered it. She was a short girl, a little too plump, about thirty. She had blue eyes, blonde hair. She was wearing a housecoat which reached almost to the floor. She stared at me with the average, cold hostility of a housewife toward a peddler or an insurance salesman.

"I am here to see Arthur Kesselring," I told her. "Is he in?"

This startled her. The shock of it was reflected in the way her eyes narrowed and in the quick breath she took. She shook her head. "I don't know who you mean. I don't know anyone named Arthur Kesselring."

I dug out one of my cards. I handed it to her. "You had better talk to me, Miss Dalhart," I said bluntly. "You'll find it's easier talking to me than to the police."

The girl moistened her lips. She stared at the card.

"Let him in, Evelyn," said a man's voice. "I'd like to find out what he's after."

Evelyn backed away from the door, pulling it open. A man stood near the beige davenport. He was perhaps thirty-five. He had ruddy cheeks, thick lips, a stubby nose, dark, thick hair, and he was scowling. His right hand was in his pocket. It might have been holding a gun.

"My name," said the man, "is Bill Geiger. I live on the next floor. I'm a friend of Evelyn's. What do you want?"

Evelyn had closed the door. She was leaning against it. A throw-rug covered the spot on the carpet where Kesselring's head had been lying the night before, hiding any stain. I told Geiger my name and business. "I was supposed to see a Mr. Kesselring at this address, I added. "It was quite important."

"He's not here," said Geiger.

"He was," I answered. "Did you know him?"

Geiger shook his head.

"Suppose I tell you about him," I suggested. "Kesselring was a Nazi agent during the war. He left an ugly trail from Shanghai to Madrid and back again. Here in San Francisco, a week ago, he killed a man in a waterfront hotel. At the present time he is engaged in blackmailing one of our foremost citizens. The F. B. I. is pretty close to him. They are going to ask you more embarrassing questions than I will."

Bill Geiger looked at Evelyn. He took his hand out of his pocket. He reached into another pocket for his cigarettes. He lit one. He sat down.

"Was Kesselring a man of about forty?" he asked. "Was he short, heavy, blond?"

I nodded.

"That describes Jim Harrison," Geiger said slowly. "Evelyn was in the WACS. Overseas, in France, she met a man who called himself Jim Harrison. A week ago

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he telephoned her. He said he had just arrived in San Francisco. You tell the story, Evelyn."

The girl crossed to the davenport, and sat down. So did I. Evelyn took one of Geiger's cigarettes, and lit it. Her fingers were shaky. She sucked in deeply on the cigarette.

"I can't believe he was a Nazi agent," she said almost to herself. "I just can't believe it. He asked to borrow my apartment. He said he had some papers he wanted me to hide. He had smuggled them in from Europe. He was trying to establish contact with a man in the State Department."

"You hid the papers?" I asked.

Evelyn nodded. "I hid them back of the silver drawer. They are not there, now. Jim must have taken them when he left."

I shook my head. "Jim, or Kesselring, which ever you prefer to call him, was killed in this room. He was carried to the alley. His body was picked up there, this morning."

Evelyn glanced quickly toward Bill Geiger. She looked down at the throw-rug, almost at her feet. Geiger was still scowling. Neither of them showed much surprise. They had figured this out for themselves, I was sure.

"The State Department, or to be more accurate, the F. B. I. wants the letters Kesselring had," I added. "What do you think happened to them?"

Evelyn shook her head as though mystified. Geiger made no comment.

"When did you last see Kesselring?" I demanded.

"About seven-thirty, last night," Evelyn answered. "Someone was here, with him. I don't know who it was. Jim came to the door. He didn't let me in. He said he was busy. He said he would telephone me later. He seemed rather pleased. He said he wouldn't need the apartment much longer."

"You didn't stay around and see who left?"

"I went back upstairs. I was staying there—with a girl friend."

She had been staying, more likely, with Bill Geiger, but there was no point in bringing that up. I lit a cigarette. I wondered how much truth there was in Evelyn's story, or to be more accurate, I wondered to what extent she had shaded the truth. She was holding something back. I could sense that in the careful way she chose her words and in the narrow, thoughtful look he saw in her eyes.

Bill Geiger glanced at his watch. He stood up. "I've got to get back to the shop," he said abruptly. "What more can we tell you, Hubbard?"

"Where's the shop?" I asked.

"Three blocks up the street. It's a radio shop. I keep it open until nine. My helper is there evenings, but I generally drop around to close up."

I nodded and climbed to my feet. I knew a little more about Kesselring and the letters but not much more. Mrs. Applegate and Perry Mason might have been able to work up a line of questioning which would have been more productive, but no such angle occurred to me. I decided I would wait outside somewhere and see what happened. If anything.

"They'll be around," I said slowly. "The police. The F. B. I. You'll have to talk to them, and when you do, don't hold anything back. The truth has a funny way of coming to light just when you think you have it safely buried."

This was a nice, fatherly speech. It didn't make me feel any better. I was going to have to do some talking to the F. B. I. myself, before very long. It was not a pleasant thing to contemplate.

BILL GEIGER plodded up the street toward his radio shop. I walked down the street a block, crossed to the far side and walked back. In the doorway of a real estate office across from the Don Ramon, I waited. I don't know exactly what I was waiting for. I had a feeling that Evelyn Dalhart was more deeply involved in this than she had admitted. If I was right, maybe something would happen. Maybe someone I knew would call at the Don Ramon. Maybe Evelyn would leave the apartment to meet someone. Things like that work out in books.

It worked out this time, too. At a little before nine Evelyn Dalhart left the apartment house. She started down Fulton Street. At the second corner was a drug store, still open. Evelyn went inside. She had a cup of coffee at the fountain. While she drank

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it she kept looking at her watch. At nine-fifteen, exactly, she left the drug store.

I hadn't noticed the car. It was parked on the side street beyond the lights from the drug store window. It had been there all the time Evelyn had been drinking her coffee. Someone leaned from the door and called to Evelyn. I couldn't see whether it was a man or a woman. Evelyn walked toward the car. Just as she reached it there were three quick shots. They didn't seem very loud. And Evelyn didn't scream. She didn't utter a sound. She simply wilted. She dropped to the pavement and lay there without moving.

The car roared away. It didn't switch on its lights. It looked like a late model Ford coupe, but I couldn't be positive, even of that. There was no chance to reach my car and follow it.

III

FROM a telephone in a gasoline service station, several blocks away, I called the Van Tyne residence down on the peninsula. It was Carol who answered. I recognized her voice.

"Let me talk to your father, Carol," I suggested. "And stand by. I want to talk to you again."

"Dad's not here," Carol answered. "He left for the city almost two hours ago. Pete, I'm worried."

She sounded worried. There was a high, almost hysterical note in her voice.

"Why?" I demanded. "What's happened?"

"I don't know, Pete. All day Dad kept asking if you had telephoned. Several times he tried to reach you. Then, just before seven, a call came in. I don't know who it was from. Dad left almost immediately."

"I'm coming down there, Carol," I said into the telephone. "Hang out a lantern."

"I'll hang out a flock of them, Pete," said Carol, and her voice sounded better. "I'll be waiting at the gate."

It's a half an hour drive from the city to the Van Tyne estate in the hills above Millbrae. Half an hour, that is, if you hurry and if you are not picked up by the highway patrol. I drove pretty fast. I tried not to think, too much, about how things might work out. I tried not to think about Carol's love for her father. The way the score added up just then was not very pretty.

Kesselring had had the letters. Van Tyne wanted them. He knew where Kesselring was staying. Kesselring had been killed and the letters were gone. At the time of Kesselring's murder, Van Tyne hadn't been home.

That was part one. Part two went as follows. Evelyn Dalhart must have seen the murderer the night before. She either had tried some blackmail on her own, or had fallen for a trick which took her to the place where she had been killed. That she had seen the murderer was almost a sure guess. Nothing else would explain her death. And again, Van Tyne wasn't home when Evelyn was killed. In fact, after a telephone call which might have been from her, he had left for the city.

This was just circumstantial analysis, I knew, but beyond Van Tyne, there weren't many places to look for the murderer. The case against Van Tyne was beginning to look rather solid.

THERE was no fog, high or otherwise, down on the peninsula. The sky was clear, star-filled, and the night was warm. Carol was actually waiting at the gate. My headlights picked up her figure as I turned through the entrance. I braked the car, drawing over to the side of the private driveway which half circled through the trees toward the house. Carol reached the car door as I opened it. She climbed in and I took her in my arms.

"I'm an awful baby," she whispered a moment later. "There's nothing to be afraid of, really. I think I just wanted to see you."

"Is your father back?" I asked.

"I think so. A car drove in just a few minutes ago, just before I came down to the gate."

"What kind of a car does your father drive, Carol?"

"The Buick, if Selma doesn't have it. Sometimes he takes the Ford coupe."

"And tonight?"

"I don't know, Pete. Why?"

Until I had to, I didn't want to answer that question. "Let's go on up to the house," I suggested. "I want to talk to him."

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Carol was clutching my arm. "There was nothing in the newspapers, Pete, about Mr. Kesselring. Why not?"

I ducked that question, too. "Sometimes," I said, "the police get the newspapers to hold back on stories. Maybe that happened this time."

We drove on up to the house and parked in an area just off of the driveway. No other cars were there. Van Tyne, apparently, had driven on to the garage. We got out of the car and walked up to the wide, front door. This was a big house, two stories high, and probably with twenty or more rooms. It was old. It had been built at the turn of the century by a man named Cole Courtney who had made a fortune in mining operations in Nevada. He had lost his money just as promptly through bucking the stock market. The house had changed hands several times. In 1928 Van Tyne had bought it. Since the death of his first wife the place had been closed most of the time. Selma liked Washington and New York better than San Francisco.

The entrance hall into which we stepped was larger than the average parlor. To the left was the library, an immense, book-filled room. Beyond this was Van Tyne's study. It had been Courtney's trophy room. Some of Courtney's mounted deer and bear heads still adorned the walls. A servant named Ellis who met us in the entrance hall reported that Van Tyne was in the study. We turned that way. Carol knocked on the closed roor.

"I'm busy," Van Tyne called. "Who is it?"

"Pete Hubbard is here," Carol answered. "Can we come in?"

Van Tyne opened the door and admitted us. He was scowling. He still didn't offer to shake hands. Selma was in the room. She was in red lounging pajamas, which she wore very well. Her hair was drawn close to her head. It was parted in the middle and was wound into a tight, neat bun on the back of her neck. She was resting comfortably on a wide, green plush couch in front of the fireplace. The smile which came to her lips as she saw me was as mechanical as any she had ever used on the stage.

"I tried, today, to reach you by telephone, Hubbard," said Van Tyne abruptly. "I tried several times."

Carol had already told me that. I explained I had been away from the office.

Van Tyne rubbed his hands together. He turned and walked to the fireplace. He stood with his back to the blazing logs. The fire hadn't been going long. It wasn't yet throwing off much heat. Carol took a chair to the left of Selma's couch. I stood near her.

"Arthur Kesselring," said Van Tyne abruptly, "is dead. The police picked up his body in an alley near Fulton Street this morning. He was identified by his fingerprints. The letters I wanted were not on him. Did you see him, Hubbard? Did you get the letters?"

"I saw him," I said slowly. "I didn't get the letters."

"What did he say about them?"

"Nothing. When I saw him he was dead."

Van Tyne shoved his fingers through his hair. This was a characteristic gesture which had no meaning.

"Kesselring was killed at about seven-thirty last night. He was killed in the apartment he had borrowed. Later, his body was carried to the alley. The police, Van Tyne, are going to be interested in where you were last night at seven-thirty."

"I was on my way here," Van Tyne snapped.

"There is another matter in which the police are going to be interested," I continued. "Evelyn Dalhart, whose apartment Kesselring was using, and who probably saw the murderer, was shot and killed not more than an hour ago. The police are also going to ask you where you were at nine-fifteen tonight."

There wasn't a sound in the room. Van Tyne glanced at Selma. His lips tightened. He stared at me. "I don't like your insinuations, Hubbard," he grated. "I will answer any questions the police ask me. In a short time, now, this entire mystery will be cleared up."

"You mean you have the Kesselring letters?" I asked.

Van Tyne made no answer. He glanced at his watch.

"Sit down, Mr. Hubbard," said Selma Van Tyne. "You have arrived early for the week-end but I am sure Carol is not disappointed."

Those were just empty words. Selma was

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only talking to fill in the awkward silence. She was smoking a cigarette from a long holder. Her fingernails were a dark purple.

I crossed to the mantel and stood not far from Van Tyne. I matched the scowl he was wearing. I reached for a cigarette of my own. Carol was leaning forward, looking frankly puzzled.

"Perhaps we should have a drink," Selma suggested. "Jethro, ring for Ellis."

"I haven't time for a drink," said Jethro Van Tyne. "I shall have to leave now. I'll not be long."

Selma straightened. A worried expression came to her face. "I don't understand, Jethro," she said slowly. "Where are you going? It's late."

Jethro had started for the door. He stopped. He looked back at Selma. "When did my son get here?" he asked bluntly. "Who sent for him?"

Selma caught her breath. If she wasn't surprised she was certainly acting with much more ability than I had ever guessed she had. "Edward!" she gasped. "You mean Edward is here?"

Jethro Van Tyne made no reply. He moved on to the door, opened it, and stepped into the library and out of sight.

Selma was standing, now. She was nibbling at her lips. She looked at Carol. She looked at me. "Why did he say that?" she asked almost in a whisper. "Why should it make any difference if Edward is here? And if he is here, where is he?"

Neither Carol nor I had any answer.

"I thought he was still in Chicago," Carol said slowly. "He was two days ago."

"Kesselring could have telephoned him," I suggested. "Chicago is only a few hours away by air."

Carol was shaking her head. She stared at Selma. "I don't believe it," she said. "I don't believe Edward wrote those letters. No one will ever make me believe he wrote them."

Here was an angle I had hardly considered. It threw every calculation I had made out of line.

"I'm not worried about Edward," said Selma abruptly. "I'm worried about Jethro. Where could he be going at this hour? It was that telephone call."

"What telephone call?" I demanded.

"Jethro had a telephone call just before you arrived. I don't know who he talked to. He mentioned ten-thirty. It's almost ten-thirty now."

Selma headed for the door. Carol and I followed her. We were in the library when we heard the front door close. I started running. I called to Carol and Selma to stay in the house. Ellis, the butler, looked startled as I cut through the entrance hall, jerked open the door and stepped outside.

VAN TYNE was nowhere in sight. I circled the house following the driveway to the garage, which had once been Cole Courtney's stable and which was better built than many a modern house. One of the overhead doors was open. I called Van Tyne's name. There was no answer. I entered the garage. There was no one in either the Ford or the Buick. There was no sound anywhere. I called Van Tyne once more but there was still no answer.

From in front of the garage I stared toward the house and to either side. The stars and an almost full moon splashed the open areas with a soft light. I could see no one. If Van Tyne had come this way he was keeping very quiet. If he hadn't come this way the next best bet was that he had headed for the gate and the highway beyond.

I circled the house once more and angled toward the gate. I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was being watched. I had the feeling that something was going to happen. There was no factual basis for this but the feeling persisted. From the shelter of the trees lining the driveway I stared toward the gate. Van Tyne was nowhere in sight. I moved closer to the gate. I stopped. Beyond the wire fence and near the gate, a car had pulled off the highway and parked. It had not been there, I was sure, when I turned my car through the gate. It had arrived later. The car's lights were off.

The best chance, of course, was that some couple had picked this spot for a bit of necking. But maybe not. Maybe Van Tyne had come here to meet someone. I moved forward. I could see no one in the car or near it. I stepped through the gate and walked boldly to where the car was parked. It was empty, a Chevvy sedan. The doors were locked. I was standing there with one foot on the running-board when I heard the

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shots. There were two of them, close together. They seemed to come from the wooded area to the left and I remembered, then, the old summer house almost hidden in the trees over that way.

I ran for the gate, then once more stopped. This car still interested me, this car and the man who had driven it here so recently. I waited silently in the shadow of one of the gate's huge stone pillars. I didn't have to wait very long. A man's figure came suddenly from the shelter of the trees to the left of the gate. The man raced toward me, toward the gate, toward his car. He was short, heavy, and in an awful hurry.

I recognized him. The man was Bill Geiger. Why he had come here I didn't understand, but this was no mere coincidence. I got in his way. I got in his way so suddenly that he ran into me. He gave a startled cry, jerked back. He slammed a vicious, frantic blow at my head, then followed this with another. I hit him twice, rocking him backwards. One more solid blow and Geiger was down. His head struck on the bricks bordering the driveway.

I stooped over. I pulled him erect, loaded him on my shoulder and carried him up to the house. Carol was at the door. She looked pale, frightened. Ellis was with her and Ellis gave me a hand. We lugged Bill Geiger inside and placed him on a couch in the Van Tyne study. He was breathing heavily, still unconscious. Selma joined us. She was carrying a gun. She pointed it at Geiger as though daring him to get up and attack her, as though expecting it.

I moved over and took the gun from her hand, giving it to Ellis. I said, "Watch him, Ellis. If he wakes up tell him to sit there and behave himself. I'll be back in a few minutes."

It was maybe two hundred yards to the old summer house. I followed a wide path through the trees. I knew what I was going to find when I got there. The body of Jethro Van Tyne was sprawled on the steps leading up to the porch. There were two bullet-holes in his chest. I went through his pockets. I found a gun but I didn't find the Kesselring letters which he had probably come here to buy.

For perhaps a full minute I stood there looking down at him. Strangely enough, I didn't hate Jethro Van Tyne any more. I was rather sorry for him, sorry for the way he had died and for the uselessness of his death and for the tragic look it would bring to his daughter's eyes. I was sorry the end had had to come like this, under the cloud of an old scandal.

IV

FROM Jethro Van Tyne's study I telephoned Roger Cozad, the F. B. I. agent, Mrs. Applegate's G-man. At the third number I reached him. He didn't sound friendly.

"I want to see you, Hubbard," he said bluntly. "We have located Kesselring. He is dead."

"So is Jethro Van Tyne," I answered. "I'm at his place now, down on the peninsula. I thought maybe you would like to be in on this before the local police. I haven't yet notified them."

Cozad didn't waste any words. "How do I get there?" he demanded.

I told him and then hung up. I glanced around the room. Ellis was still watching Bill Geiger, who hadn't yet recovered consciousness. Carol was huddled in a chair near Van Tyne's massive desk. She hadn't said a word since she had heard what had happened to her father. There was almost no color in her cheeks. Selma stood at one side of the fireplace, smoking another cigarette. She was tense, nervous. She couldn't keep still.

It would be half an hour, maybe forty-five minutes until Roger Cozad got here. I walked over to where Carol was sitting. I dropped a hand on her shoulder and Carol reached up and squeezed it. She managed a smile. "It's all over, isn't it?" she said under her breath.

I nodded my head. "Almost, Carol."

"Who is he?" she asked, indicating Bill Geiger.

"He lived in Don Ramon apartments above Evelyn Dalhart," I answered. "Through her he learned of the Kesselring letters and of their value. He killed Arthur Kesselring to gain possession of them. An hour or so ago he killed Evelyn Dalhart, probably because she knew he had murdered Kesselring. He is the man who telephoned your father just before I got here. He must have offered to sell your father the Kessel-

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ring letters. When they met at the summer house there was an argument, probably about the price. Geiger shot your father. He was running for his car when I met him."

I stopped talking. I reached for a cigarette. This was the answer, of course, but parts of it didn't hang together. The Kesselring letters hadn't been on Van Tyne's body. They hadn't been in Geiger's pockets when I had searched him a few minutes before. There was another glaring error in my analysis. Bill Geiger's car was an old Chevvy sedan. It definitely wasn't the car which had driven away from the drug store after the murder of Evelyn Dalhart.

"When the man from the F. B. I. gets here," I said slowly, "we are all going to have to answer a lot of questions. We might as well review them now. Carol, where were you last night?"

"You know where I was," said Carol, looking up at me.

I glanced at Selma.

"I was driving out here from the city," Selma answered. "I left San Francisco just a little after seven."

This took care of Selma at the time Kesselring was murdered. But I hadn't asked her that. I had specified no hour. I had asked her what she was doing last night.

"What about tonight?" I said bluntly.

"I was here," said Carol. "I haven't been away all day."

"What about you, Selma?" I demanded.

"I had dinner with friends in the city," Selma replied. "I didn't get home until almost ten."

I glanced at Carol.

"There was a car which drove in just before Dad's," Carol said slowly. "It must have been Selma's."

I nodded. I was aware of a sudden, driving excitement. I wished that Mrs. Applegate and Perry Mason and Ellery Queen were here to help me follow up this line of questioning. I sucked on my cigarette. I walked over to the fireplace and tossed it back of the blazing logs. I stared thoughtfully at Selma.

"You were here when Van Tyne got his telephone call," I reminded her. "You've got to realize that Bill Geiger will try to lie out of everything. Tell me this. Did your husband mention the summer house? He must have. Without direction, Geiger couldn't have found it."

Selma was nodding before I finished. "Jethro did mention the summer house," she agreed. "He told whoever he was talking to, how to get there."

THE pieces of the puzzle were all falling into place. Selma had no sound alibi for the time of Kesselring's murder or for the hour when Evelyn Dalhart had been shot. She had known that her husband was meeting someone at the summer house. She hadn't been here when I reached the house carrying Bill Geiger. She had come in a moment later. She could have come from the summer house. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility. And if Selma had been the one who had written the Kesselring letters she had faced the necessity of destroying them before Van Tyne saw them.

I lit another cigarette. I moved up and took the gun Ellis was holding. I said, "Get us a drink, Ellis. I think we all need it."

With my back to Selma I removed the clip from the gun and the bullet from the firing chamber. I palmed the clip and the extra bullet and dropped them into my pocket. Ellis left the room. I turned toward Selma.

"Can you watch Geiger for a moment?" I asked. "I'm going to take Carol upstairs."

Selma nodded. She stretched out her hand toward the gun.

"If he wakes up he may try to get away," I warned. "Don't let him. I'm quite anxious to hear what he can tell us."

Selma's eyes were on the gun. She was breathing fast. I let her take it. I crossed over to Carol's chair and in spite of her objections, made her get up and started with her toward the door. This was crude, but it might work. It was the best trick I could think of.

Carol and I crossed sthe library and at the far end of the room I left her. I said, "Wait here, Carol. I've forgotten something. I'll be right back."

The door to the study was open just a crack. I pulled it wider. I looked in at Selma. I was just in time. The gun in her hand was pointed at Bill Geiger. She was leaning forward. She winced as she pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. She stared at the gun, and she must have guessed why

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it hadn't gone off for she whirled, suddenly, toward the library door. There was an ugly, strained look on her face. Selma wasn't acting, now. All that she had done was crowding in on her, shoving her into a corner. She was beginning to feel the pinch of fear.

I opened the door, wider. I just stood there. I didn't say anything. Selma looked once more at the gun in her hand. She shrugged her shoulders. "It's unloaded, isn't it?" she said slowly.

I nodded. "Yes, it's unloaded."

Selma turned. She placed the gun on the mantel, crossed to the desk where she picked up a package of cigarettes. She lit one.

"Very clever of you, Pete," she said dryly. "It fooled me. What happens now?"

"Isn't that up to you?" I suggested.

Selma shook her head. "You have no proof of anything. None at all. No one would ever believe I killed Jethro. No one would dare accuse me of having written the letters to Arthur Kesselring. It would be ridiculous to say I had killed him."

"It wasn't ridiculous to Evelyn Dalhart."

"She's dead."

"But Bill Geiger isn't. Maybe Geiger knows what Evelyn knew. He at least knows what he did with the Kesselring letters. By the way, where are they?"

Selma smiled. She shook her head. "You are very clever, Pete. You almost convince me that I am the murderer. Let me show you something."

Selma was playing a scene which had never been written. She was playing it superbly, with perfect command. She moved around in front of Van Tyne's desk, and pulled open a drawer. She reached inside, straightened, and her arm came up. I ducked back out of the doorway just in time. A bullet from the gun she had lifted screamed into the library. There was a second shot. I stood close to the wall, near the door.

"Too bad, Pete," Selma called. "If I had only been a little quicker I could have blamed it on Bill Geiger. I almost succeeded."

There were French doors in the study. I heard them open, then slam shut, but I didn't move from where I stood. Selma could still have shot me and blamed my death on Bill Geiger, who would die next.

Carol was running toward me. I shouted to her to keep back. When she didn't I moved into the library to meet her, drawing her to one side.

"I thought I heard Selma's voice," Carol whispered. "Pete, what's happening?"

I shook my head. "I don't know, Carol. Maybe she's gone."

"You mean—it was Selma?"

"Yes, it was Selma."

"Tell me all of it, Pete."

THERE was no reason not to tell her. "She wrote the letters, Carol," I answered. "She tried to get them back from Kesselring. When she couldn't, she killed him. Maybe it was accidental. Maybe she struck him harder than she intended. We may never know, exactly what happened between them. Evelyn Dalhart must have seen her at the apartment and for that reason Selma killed Evelyn."

"Dad, too?" Carol asked.

"Yes, your father, too, when he went to the summer house and bought the letters from Bill Geiger who had stolen them. Selma had to have those letters, Carol. She had to destroy them. They would have pointed straight to her."

I heard the sound of a car's motor. I hurried to the library window, and I caught just a glimpse of the Ford coupe as it roared past the house and turned down the driveway toward the gate. I couldn't see who was driving but I knew it was Selma. I thought she had made good a temporary escape. In the library we couldn't hear the sound of the crash as the Ford coupe, swinging into a fast turn, skidded into one of the stone pillars and then rolled across the highway and down the embankment beyond.

THEY carried Selma into the house and up to her room. She was pretty badly injured. The doctor who had been summoned from Millbrae did what he could to deaden the pain, there was no chance at all to save her. Two of her ribs had punctured her lungs.

By this time, Roger Cozad had arrived from the city. Three more federal agents were with him. By this time, too, Bill Geiger had recovered consciousness and was ready to talk. His story was almost what I had expected.

Evelyn Dalhart had summoned him when

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she discovered Kesselring's body. He had stolen the letters. He had telephoned Van Tyne and had made an appointment for ten-thirty that night at the summer house. Van Tyne had bought the letters. The money was under Geiger's shirt. Geiger had started back toward his car when he heard the shots which had taken Van Tyne's life. He didn't see the murder. And he didn't know positively that Evelyn Dalhart had seen Selma at Kesselring's apartment. He was pretty much broken up over Evelyn's death.

Selma, according to Roger Cozad, made a full confession. She insisted she hadn't meant to kill Arthur Kesselring. She had just wanted to stun him. She had expected to find the letters in his pocket. They weren't there. She had started to search the apartment but Evelyn had frightened her away before she found the letters. She had secured them tonight, had taken them from her husband's body. They had been in the car at the time of the accident, so Cozad had them.

"Mrs. Van Tyne was once married to Arthur Kesselring," Cozad told me. "This was long ago when Kesselring was using another name. Mrs. Van Tyne insists that Kesselring forced her to help him. He threatened to wreck her marriage to Van Tyne if she didn't. There had never been a divorce. I haven't checked this, of course, but it might be true."

I nodded. I had another cigarette. I offered Cozad one, and he took it.

"There is one thing we haven't cleared up," he mentioned. "Who was it who moved Kesselring's body from Evelyn Dalhart's apartment to the alley?"

"What difference does that make now?" I asked casually.

Cozad shrugged. "None, I suppose. I just like to tie up all the ends. Perhaps it was Evelyn Dalhart."

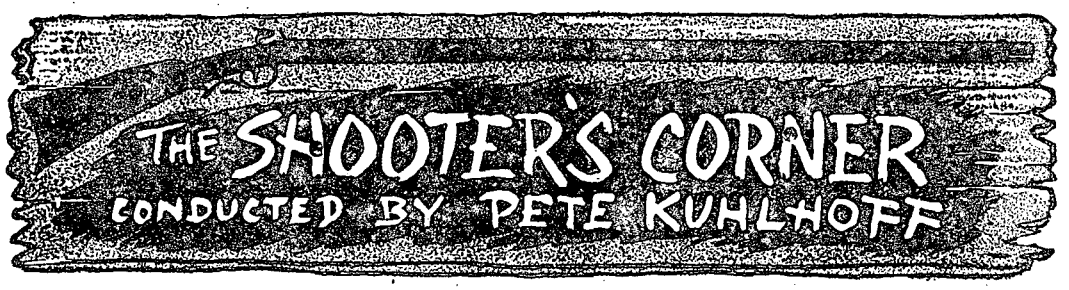
I shrugged my shoulders. I tried to look unconcerned. After a sharp glance at me Cozad turned away.

There might still be some trouble over that, but I didn't think so. I started toward the study where I had left Carol a few moments before. I was beginning to understand why Jethro Van Tyne might have been opposed to hasty marriages. His own hadn't worked out too well. For a long time, perhaps, he might have suspected Selma of writing those letters. She had probably tried to shift the suspicion to his son. It might even have been Selma who had dragged in Edward's ghost tonight.

There was no point, however, in digging any deeper into the past. We had all the answers which were necessary.

I came to the study door. I opened it. I stepped inside and closed it, hoping that I was closing the door on all the tragedy we would know for a long time.

Carol was waiting for me.



Looking Back

SAFE handling of firearms is without question the most important element of shooting!

During over thirty-five years of shooting I have seen so many accidents and near accidents—to say nothing of being on the receiving end of a rifle bullet—that my feeling about gun safety has become almost a superstitious phobia. I own quite a number of guns, they are constantly being handled not only by myself but by friends and visitors, so I make it a point to have only one loaded gun in the house. It is an automatic pistol with no cartridge in the chamber, but five in the magazine and the magazine not completely pushed into the grip. This pistol is kept where a visitor or other person is not likely to find it.

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Through long experience I have found that memory definitely can never be trusted, so every time I pick up a gun of any kind I automatically check to see that it is not loaded. This precaution should become second nature with all shooters!

I will never hunt with an individual who at any time points a gun at another person. Anyone who will point a gun, loaded or unloaded, at a human being either intends to shoot that person, or is a damn fool! So, the best course to follow is to have nothing to do with such a character.

All ammunition should be kept under lock and key. Kids and nosey people can get in trouble with guns and ammo within easy reach.

All members of well-run shooting clubs realize the importance of practicing gun safety. A member who is negligent on this point is dropped from the membership rolls, but quick!

Many years ago in our local organization we put up a list of range rules. They are still good, and will bear repeating.

1. No gun will be loaded, nor the action closed, until on the firing-line. Guns will be unloaded and the action opened before turning from the firing-line.

2. There will be no snapping, aiming, or other practice with a gun except on the firing-line or on the flanks of the line where a shot could do no harm. Such aiming and snapping practice will only be done at regular range targets.

3. Guns must be kept open at all times when off the firing-line, and magazines removed from rifles using this type.

4. Guns must not be picked up by visitors, or by others than the owners, without the owner's specific consent.

5. Guns must be opened and laid down when runners are on the range changing targets. The officer in charge will see that this is done before letting persons go forward on the range.

6. Every precaution should be taken to make sure that the range is clear of persons before opening fire. The range officer will be held responsible.

7. At no time shall a gun, loaded or unloaded, open or closed, be pointed in the direction of others. Offenders will receive stern and emphatic warning, and if they persist, will be ordered off the range.

8. The range officer is the supreme boss.

These rules are for *your* protection. They are based on years of range experience, and on the observation of the causes of many fatal accidents.

They will be ENFORCED to the letter.

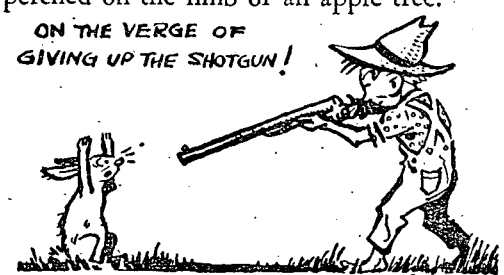
Practically all shooting clubs have rules such as the above, and due to the fact that they are strictly enforced, gun accidents are almost unknown among target shooters.

Always remember GUN SAFETY IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENT IN SHOOTING OF ANY KIND!

I well remember the terrific shock I received when I first saw the tremendous destructive power of the shotgun. The gun was an old full-choke 10-gauge Ithaca taking brass shells.

I had reached the advanced age of seven and considered myself quite a hand with a rifle, having had a couple of years experience using a .22 caliber Winchester repeater for cottontail and squirrel hunting, and had fired a .38-55 rifle quite a number of times.

I pestered my grandfather until he finally gave me permission to take the big shotgun for a little bird hunting. I hot-footed it down through the orchard on my way to what I considered good quail cover. An unfortunate turtle-dove happened to be perched on the limb of an apple tree.



Figuring that a dove was good game I crept up until within a few feet of the bird. With both hammers of the gun cocked, just in case a second shot would be necessary, I poked the muzzle at the dove, and fired. Both barrels blasted at once with the recoil knocking me flat on my back. The bird had completely disappeared and not only that but the shot had cut off a good-sized limb from one of Granddad's favorite apple trees. Having never seen game of any kind completely mangled by gunfire, I was horrified to find that the bird had been atomized, and disgusted at the loss of the game.

Realizing that a shotgun was an entirely

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different proposition from a rifle, I tried it on a cottontail rabbit. Again the shot was made at close range and the rabbit was terribly mutilated. (Later I learned that I had used heavy goose loads.) My feelings after examining the remains could be best described as one of nausea mixed with frightened admiration for the old scatter-gun. Anyway, I could hardly stand the chore of lugging the old "side by side" back to the house. I didn't "take up" with a shotgun again for about six years, doing all of my hunting, including ducks and quail, with a rifle. A practice that cannot be recommended today with the crowded condition of most hunting areas. Also, there are laws agin it!

When reloading ammunition a shooter must be very careful when approaching full power charges. Such loads should be carefully weighed on scales sensitive to 1/10-grain. That's a very small amount of powder, for remember there are 7,000 grains to the pound.

I have purposely blown up several rifles and pistols in the course of experiments and have found that a number of elements, often overlooked, may be directly responsible for raising pressures to astronomical heights, sometimes with disastrous results.

Remember, I'm speaking of maximum loads!

For instance, a high-power rifle with very close or tight chambering at the neck of the cartridge may be the cause of high pressure when a cartridge with slightly thicker brass at this point is fired. Or, a heavily loaded cartridge that gives no evidence of high pressure in a loose military rifle chamber, may give very high pressure in a closely chambered sporting rifle. Military rifles are chambered loosely on purpose so that, if necessary, dirty or corroded cartridges may be used. A change from government chlorate to very hot commercial non-corrosive primers will also run up pressures. Generally speaking there is no reason for a reloader to fool around with cartridges having maximum pressure loads, as they are in most instances less accurate than cartridges loaded with several grains less powder.

Don't get the idea that I am agin reloading, I'm not, for it is one of the most interesting phases of the shooting game—to say nothing of the economy angle involved.

There are a number of reasons for reloading ammunition. One of the most important to be considered is that concerning accuracy. Each rifle is a law unto itself in this respect. A cartridge that will give superfine accuracy in one rifle may give mediocre or downright poor results in another rifle of the same caliber. This is no reflection on the ability of our rifle makers!

The only way to find the most accurate load for a particular rifle is to experiment until it is found. I'm speaking of tack-driving accuracy necessary for long-range game or target shooting. Ordinarily a few grains (assuming that the proper powder is used) one way or the other will make the difference. Sometimes a rifle will shoot one brand of commercial ammunition with better accuracy than others. A rifle may shoot better with one particular type or shape of bullet. One rifle may do better with the bullet seated in the cartridge case so that when chambered, it, the bullet, is in firm contact with the lands of the rifling of the bore of the barrel. Another may prefer to have the bullet short of the rifling, and so on.

Other elements that may have a direct bearing on accuracy include bedding of the barrel and action in the stock, size of barrel (with other points equal, a heavy barrel will ordinarily shoot more accurately than a lightweight one), stiffness of barrel, action and stock as a unit (a bolt action is inherently more accurate than a lever, slide or automatic action rifle, due to this stiffness). The diameter of the bullet in relation to that of the bore of the barrel (some barrels will do better with a bullet of exact groove of bore diameter).

Once in a while we find a rifle that seems perfect in every respect, yet will not give good accuracy. Or, on the other hand, we may find one that by all appearances should not shoot accurately at all, and yet will put 'em all in one ragged hole.

Most rifles will group at different points on the target when using different weight bullets, but now and then on very rare occasions we find one that will put all weight bullets in one group, say at 200 yards.

Yep, this shooting game is surely an interesting one, constantly new problems to try to solve, all of them interesting!

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"Every Dawn Our People Marched Off into the Jungle to Slave All Day for the Fortune Hunters . . ."

THE TREASURE

By HUGH B. CAVE

AT FOUR in the morning Joe Farrell finished his preparations for departure and stepped to his door to make sure the way was clear. The village of Sabagan was just beginning to emerge from the mountain mist. Brother Andre's school, the nipa-thatched native houses, the tents of the renegade whites whose coming had caused all the trouble—nothing was quite distinct yet from the dark wall of Mindanao's jungle.

Joe gathered up his pack and cautiously descended the steps. It had been a long night. He had managed only once or twice to close his eyes, and time and again had been certain he heard ominous sounds in the blackness. His nerves, probably. Now as he crossed the village he was trembling.

He passed the native gardens and crossed the rude bridge over the stream at the village outskirts. Hid his pack in a cogan thicket, and looked longingly down the trail which led through the wild, steep mountains to Cotabato, on the coast. Reluctantly, then, he turned and went back.

He could not leave yet. The three whites had ordered him to carry on at the school as if nothing had happened. He must wait until they had gone into the bush, taking

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most of the adult native population with them. Then——

Could he reach the coast on foot, without a guide? Markham and his two companions obviously did not think he would have the courage to try, or they would have allowed him less freedom. He was not a prisoner, exactly. The natives were forbidden to speak to him, but he could come and go as he pleased. Evidently Markham considered the jungle, with its maze of misleading trails and swift streams, a sufficiently high wall!

Three days to the coast! Even on horseback, with guides, the journey had been a nightmare when he came to Sabagan six months ago to assist Brother Andre at the school. But more than dread of the journey dismayed him now. He was angry and disillusioned. His faith was gone.

It was a bitter thing to know that all their work had been for nothing. Even more bitter to contemplate carrying the ugly truth to the man who was fighting his own dark battle with illness in Cotabato. How would he tell Brother Andre what had happened?

"You had been gone three weeks when they came. They had learned—heaven knows how—that there is gold to be found near our village. Perhaps that geologist fellow who stopped with us— At any rate, they had a map.

"I could do nothing. They forced me to remain in my house the first few days, while they bribed our people—*our* people, Brother Andre!—with liquor and cheap trinkets. The damage was done by the time I was released. Every morning at daybreak our people marched off into the jungle, to slave all day for the fortune hunters.

"Even Kanuri. You won't believe this, but it is true. We were so certain that Kanuri would be a real leader when we moved on. Yet he never came near me. He ignored me completely."

THIS the message he must deliver to Brother Andre, if ever he reached Cotabato. This after Brother Andre had worked among the hill people for six long years, through privation and sickness, certain that he was teaching them to be wise, honest, self-sufficient.

It would be the end of the world.

Joe sat on the steps of his house, watching the mist rise, the light strengthen. There were sounds in the barrio now as women rose to begin the day's work and men stretched from their mats, heavy-headed with liquor, to follow their new masters into the bush. Presently from the tents at the end of the village street the white men emerged, and one shouted a command.

They glanced at Joe in amusement as they passed. So sure of themselves! After them came the natives, chattering like children but falling silent when they saw Joe watching. Kanuri, sturdy as a young almond tree, dropped his gaze as he passed. *He* could have persuaded his people to turn the renegades out, but no—he spent more time in Markham's shadow than any of them.

What sort of secret place was it, Joe wondered, where the village natives slaved from dawn to darkness every day? It lay more than a mile from the village, through jungle which heretofore had known no trail; that much he knew from overheard bits of talk. All day long the natives dug in the ground, or carried baskets of gold-rich earth to a small stream where the dirt was washed until only the precious yellow glitter was left. Markham and his companions had built the rude troughs and water-chutes, but the natives had been taught to do the work.

THE last of the voices died away. The barrio was abandoned except for the children and a few wrinkled oldsters who nodded by their doorways in the morning sun. Joe rose. With books under his arm he walked to the school building and took his place behind the bamboo table that served as a desk. The children filed in, noisy as school kids anywhere, eyes dancing, teeth flashing in bright smiles.

He faced them bravely. "There will be no school today. I am not well this morning. A touch of fever." He pressed a hand to his forehead. Perhaps he did have a fever. Those strange sounds last night from the jungle may have existed only in his head. "No school," he repeated. "You may go."

A voice piped up. "When will Brother Andre come back, Mr. Farrell?"

"Soon, I hope."

"When will the gold hunters go, Mr. Farrell?"

"I do not know."

Joe returned to his house. But not to stay

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there. In a little while, garden basket in hand, he went across the village again. They would not suspect.

At the end of the garden he paused to look back. Farewell to six months of wasted effort! He crossed the stream, threw down his basket and snatched up the pack he had hidden there. And went on.

It was a poor sort of trail, all laced with roots, twisting along the river's edge with maddening disregard for direction. Joe was familiar with the first mile or two; had walked them with Brother Andre in search of rare birds and blossoms. But when the path swung from the stream into the stifling gloom of the jungle, he was on strange ground. With every forward step his glance leaped ahead like a defending hand, alert for unknown things that might crawl or leap from the pressing shadows to bite or sting.

Three days of this! And nights! He dared not think of it.

Resolutely he trudged on, pausing now and then to listen for sounds of pursuit. When night settled, creeping down the trunks of the huge trees to spread like a black breath through the jungle, he was too tired to build a shelter—could only strip a few fronds of tree fern to place between his aching body and the damp ground. He fell asleep shivering in the sudden cold that came with darkness.

When he awoke, his ill-chosen campsite was a morass. Rain drummed the sodden ground about him. The tops of the trees, invisible in the void above, swayed and creaked in a rising wind. And the night was not half over.

He tried to make a fire—so easy to live in the bush, Brother Andre had said, if one knew how! But his supplies were wet through, his matches were spoiled; he himself was drenched, shivering. Huddled miserably among the sprawling roots of a tree whose broad branches tossed wildly overhead, he waited for dawn. When it came at last, he rose and went on.

All morning the sky stayed black, spitting sudden violent downpours. The jungle was a vast white mist, the trail slippery and hard to follow. He was feverish long before he stopped at noon to eat. A fire was out of the question. Nothing anywhere was dry. The natives, perhaps—but he was no native, able to scratch firewood from the hearts of rotted blowdowns and kindle a spark with a rubbing-stick. He ate his food cold and tried to go on.

But the rain had finished him. His fever, born of the chill damp, was rampant. He stumbled, could go no farther. Even the next village, which must be close now, was beyond his reach.

He felt the saturated earth throbbing under his feet. Looked up, and heard hoofbeats on the trail ahead. He stopped, stood swaying, doubting his senses. In the mist before him, like something in a dream, appeared a plodding Mindanao pony, bearing a rider with a familiar face.

"Brother Andre!" Joe ran toward him, fell, and could not get up. Could not even call again. He knew no more until his eyes opened and he found himself lying in a palm-leaf shelter which Brother Andre and his two Filipino guides had built for him beside the trail.

Hours must have passed. It was night again. A fire blazed and Brother Andre sat quietly in the glow of it, watching.

"Awake?" The older man bent forward, pale and thin after his long illness, but smiling. "You've had a rough time of it, Joe."

"I—I was trying to reach you."

"I guessed as much. "Why?"

Joe told him, while the night waned and with it the fever which had almost finished him. "You mustn't go on to Sabagan, Brother Andre! Markham and those other two—even our own people might turn on you!"

"Our own people?" Brother Andre looked at him queerly.

"You don't know them!"

"It's time I did, then—don't you think? You rest now. When you are stronger, the boys will take you down to Cotabato."

When Joe awoke, Brother Andre was gone. The fever had passed; he was himself again. Go to Cotabato? Not if he could help it! "We're going to Sabagan," he told the Filipino boys firmly. "And don't give me an argument!"

But fear rode with him. Fear that Brother Brother Andre would be jeered at, or worse, in front of his people. The man was unarmed, Joe remembered. *Why* had he not returned to the coast to enlist help from the

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authorities, instead of taking such a long chance?

Joe knew why. In spite of all that Brother Andre had been told, he still believed in Sabagan's people. He still had faith.

By the time he reached the river-crossing at the village outskirts, Joe was sick with anxiety. There a wave of sound stopped him and he dismounted, afraid to go on. The natives should be working in the bush at this hour. . . .

But he had to know. Fearfully he advanced, dreading what he would find.

They were milling about something Joe could not see, in the village street. Shouting. Laughing. Waving their arms. It was bedlam. Then all at once he did see what was going on. Brother Andre stood in the midst of the crowd. The wild commotion was a welcome!

Where were Markham and his renegade gold hunters?

"Joe!" Brother Andre strode forward with a great gusty laugh that meant his faith was whole again, if ever it had been shaken. And now Joe saw Kanuri hurrying toward them, all smiles.

Joe found his voice at last. "Kanuri! Where is Markham? Where are the other two?"

STURDY as a young almond tree Kanuri stood before Brother Andre. His eyes and teeth flashed in quick mirth; then he was solemn.

"A strange thing happen," said Kanuri gravely. "Day before yesterday the white men lead us into the bush as always, and what you think? There is no trail!"

Joe was only bewildered.

"No trail!" repeated Kanuri, wagging his head. "All gone like magic! The white men study their map and look for landmarks in the bush. Our people look too. But the bush is very thick there. It is impossible to find gold diggings with the path and landmarks gone. Very easy to get lost, too. The white men get tired and sick. By-m-by return to village."

His eyes twinkled with innocence. "Next day—yesterday—we hunt for trail again. Start very early and hunt all day. No good. Only get worse lost. All day it rain, rain, rain—evil spirits who make trail disappear must know it will rain bad, to give white men much fever. We have to carry white men back to village—very long way, very hard journey. Oh yes, *very* hard journey."

Kanuri heaved a great sigh. "This morning," he concluded sadly, "the white men decide not to look for gold diggings any more. Much too sick. They trade us their tents and tools for a boat to go down the river in. All done. Finish."

Joe stared at him, remembering. The sounds he had heard from the jungle the night before his flight. Sounds of chopping—the distant crash of a tree now and then. Not his imagination, after all! But what was Kanuri saying?

"It is good the white men go away, no? The gold not belong to them; it belong to us. Only first we have to learn where it is and how to take it from the ground, no? Of course!"

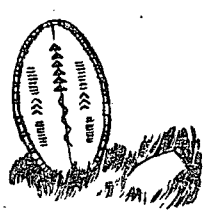
Brother Andre was laughing. Joe wanted to laugh, too—at his own lunacy in thinking even for a moment that Kanuri and his people were stupid. But his scowl persisted.

We taught them to be shrewd and clever, he thought, *but is that all? Is that all? We tried so hard to teach them more. . . .*

Kanuri must have been a mind-reader, too, for suddenly he grinned.

"You know what we do with our gold?" he said boldly. "We make a bigger school in Sabagan! We send 'way off to Manila for more books! We give our people things they need to be healthy and happy. Yes, Brother Andre?"

Brother Andre put a hand on Joe's shoulder. "You see?" he said softly. His smile was a thing complete.



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Having Held a Job One Whole Day, Johnny Fletcher Decides That's Just About All He Can Stand of That!

THE LEATHER DUKE

By FRANK GRUBER

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Part II

THE STORY SO FAR:

JOHNNY FLETCHER and Sam Cragg have come to desperate straits—their book supply has dried up, so they have no copies to sell of "Every Man a Samson," and they are forced to heed a "Man Wanted" sign and go to work.

Their labors are in a leather factory which is owned by Harry Towner, known as the Leather Duke. Harry's son Elliott is working there to learn the business, and Johnny Fletcher—who always hangs around where money is—tries to cultivate Elliott's acquaintance. Then one of the factory workmen is found dead, and Johnny is full of theories of foul play. He trails Harry Towner to his club—he and Sam badly needed a dinner—and over the food tells Towner that a survival of the Italian Black Hand Society is at the bottom of the death of the worker, Al Piper. Towner is doubt-

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ful, but Johnny launches forth into a learned discussion of the Mafia Society—spinning it out till he and Sam can fill up on steak and french fries.

VII

THE waiters were still putting out food when Johnny and Sam attacked their steaks. Johnny munched a huge forkful of meat.

"You're right, Mr. Towner," he said happily, "they simply don't know how to broil a steak here."

"Are you kidding?" cried Sam. He shoved half of a clover leaf roll into his mouth, pushed it back with about four ounces of steak.

The headwaiter came up to the table carrying an extension telephone. "Telephone, Mr. Towner." He plugged the cord into a socket.

"Who is it?"

"Miss Towner, sir."

The Leather Duke brightened, took the telephone. "Yes, my dear? . . . Oh, you are? Well, look, why don't you come down to the grill room? We've just started to eat. Fine." He put down the receiver. "My daughter's up in the main dining room," he said to Johnny. "They're coming down to join us."

"They?"

"Oh, she's with Elliott and her fiancé." Harry Towner made a careless brushing movement. "Continue, Fletcher, you were saying that the *Mafia* was behind this business."

"No sir" Johnny said, promptly. "I *didn't* say that. I merely reminded you that the *Mafia* has been considered extinct several times before and each time—"

"Damn this hush-hush stuff, Fletcher!" exclaimed Towner. "You're talking to *me* —you don't have to beat about the bush. You said that this man, what the devil was his name, Piper or Fifer—" He stopped suddenly snapped his fingers. "You said yourself that the *Mafia* always confined itself to Italians. Piper is certainly not an Italian name."

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"No, it isn't," said Johnny. "And that's exactly what I was driving at. This man *called* himself Piper—do you see, sir?"

The Leather Duke's eyes lit up. "Ah-h, yes."

"We know, Mr. Towner," Johnny said softly, "that an Italian named Carmella Vitali had a quarrel with this man who called himself Piper and we know that Carmella quit his job this morning and that—" Johnny paused significantly, "—shortly afterwards Piper was found dead, his throat cut!"

Harry Towner nodded thoughtfully. "The police took this Carmella into custody this afternoon for questioning."

"They'll get nothing out of him," Johnny said promptly. "Nothing but evasions and lies. The rule of the *Mafia*—silence!"

"I'd make him talk," Towner said grimly. "If the police'd give him to me for a half hour, he'd talk. I'd take him and—"

He stopped, looked past Johnny and Sam. Johnny turned. Elliott Towner was approaching the table. Behind him was a tall, dark-haired man of about thirty, wearing tweeds, and the most beautiful girl Johnny had ever seen. She was about twenty-two or twenty-three, fairly tall with dark chestnut hair. But it was her face that was really beautiful. Not that she had even classical features, no, many girls had those. This one had a sparkling vitality, a personality that jolted Johnny like a live power line.

He kicked back his chair, got to his feet.

Harry Towner also rose. "Elliott," he said, "Linda!" He put all the emphasis upon the girl's name. He ignored the fiance completely.

"Dad," said Linda Towner and kissed her father on the cheek.

"Linda, Mr. Fletcher and Mr. Cragg."

"H'arya," said Sam.

Johnny smiled, leaned forward and she gave him her hand. "How do you do, Miss Towner."

She murmured an acknowledgment.

"My son, Elliott," went on Towner. Elliott stared coolly at Johnny. "We've met."

"Oh, of course, at the plant. Ah yes, I almost forgot. And, ah, Mr. Wendland, Mr. Fletcher, Mr. Cragg. We've been discussing business, but we're about through for the moment. Won't you sit down?"

A waiter brought additional chairs and everyone seated themselves. Johnny, aware that Elliott Towner was regarding him steadily, shifted his look from Linda Towner.

"You can't pay here," Elliott said.

Johnny looked at him blankly. "Eh?"

"Members sign."

Harry Towner heard the last remark. "What's that, Elliott?"

"Why, I was just saying that Mr. Fletcher and Mr. Cragg are fellow workers at the plant."

Harry Towner laughed jovially and slapped the table with an open palm. "So they are, Elliott, so they are, and you think ——"

Johnny put a warning finger to his lips. "Mr. Towner, please!"

"But this is my family, Fletcher. Freddie, too—he's practically one of us."

"Just the same—" began Johnny.

"Nonsense, Fletcher, nonsense, I have no secrets from my family. They're interested in the business as much as I am."

"A secret!" exclaimed Linda Towner. "What is it?"

"A secret," said Johnny desperately.

Then Linda turned the full power of her hazel eyes on him. "A secret, Mr. Fletcher, connected with the business? And you're trying to keep it from me? You haven't got a chance. I'll get it from you, sooner or later, so you might as well save yourself wear and tear and spill it now."

Harry Towner sobered. "I don't know, Linda. It's rather unpleasant, but then you've probably already seen it in the papers."

"Oh, that! Of course. As a matter of fact, Elliott was telling us about it upstairs." She suddenly turned to Sam. "Cragg—you're the Sam Cragg who found the body. Is it true that you lift up barrels of leather with one hand?"

"Naw," replied Sam, "I use two hands on account of its too hard to get hold of a barrel with one hand. But I could lift 'em with one hand if they had handles."

"What's that?" asked The Leather Duke.

Elliott turned to his father. "Sam Cragg's a strong man. He picks up two hundred pound barrels and raises them over his head."

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Towner regarded Sam with interest. "You're really strong, eh?" He nodded in satisfaction. "Comes in handy with your work, I suppose."

"Yeah, sure," agreed Sam. "We don't have to bother cranking up that dinky elevator."

"Speaking of elevators," Johnny said loudly, "remember that Senegalese in Casablanca —" Then he winced. "No, I can't talk about that. Not yet."

"Why not, Mr. Fletcher?" Elliott Towner demanded.

Johnny squinted and looked at Harry Towner. The leather man took it up for Johnny. "That's the secret, Elliott. And perhaps Fletcher is right, the fewer who know the better."

"The fewer who know what?" persisted Elliott.

Harry Towner hesitated and Johnny, with a sigh, put his napkin on the table. "What do you say, Sam, do you think we might get going?"

"Huh? I ain't had my dessert yet. I was figuring on apple pie a la mode. You promised me —"

"I know, but it's getting late and we've got to stake out that place."

"Stake out!" cried Linda Towner. "I know what that means. I read it in a detective story. Who're are you going to watch, Mr. Fletcher?"

Johnny got to his feet. "I'm afraid I've said too much already, Miss Towner. You'll —you'll keep this quiet?"

"Of course, but—" She frowned in sudden thought. "I've half a mind to make you let us come along. Freddie, are you game?"

"Game for what, Linda?" asked Fred Wendland. "This is all a little too fast for me."

"How can you be so dense?" cried Linda. "What've we been talking about all through dinner?"

"Why, that horrible murder."

"And Mr. Fletcher and Mr. Cragg are going to do a take-out. What does that suggest?"

"They're going to, ah, well what are they going to do?"

"I'm afraid we've got to run now," cut in Johnny.

Linda Towner got to her feet. "Wait—I'm going with you."

"Oh no," said Johnny quickly. "You couldn't possibly." He appealed to Linda's father. "Little Italy, hardly the place for —"

"Of course, Linda, sit down," said Harry Towner.

"I'm not afraid, Dad. It'll be fun—watching from a dark doorway—watching —"

"I'm sorry, Miss Towner," Johnny insisted. "If it were possible, I'd let you come along. But it isn't."

Linda looked at him, sighed and seated herself. "All right, but I want to know all about it tomorrow. You'll tell me?"

"Yes," said Johnny, "I will."

"I'd like to hear it, too," chimed in Elliott Towner.

Johnny gave him a faint smile and tapped Sam's shoulder. "Come on, Sam. You'll excuse us—"

"I'll see you tomorrow, Fletcher," boomed Harry Towner.

SAM got up reluctantly from the table and followed Johnny. As they left the grill room, he said peevishly, "I can't understand why it is I never get around to the dessert. Seems like as if somethin' always happens—"

"Something much more drastic would have happened if we'd stayed, Sam. Elliott doesn't like us one bit. We got a dinner out of it."

Sam brightened. "Such a line of bull, Johnny, I never heard."

"Every word I spoke was the truth, Sam."

"Huh? You told him we were undercover men."

"I told him nothing of the kind. Mr. Towner may have assumed from the *way* I spoke that we were more than laborers in his factory, but the words I used were true."

"Yeah, but that Black Hand stuff."

"Nothing but the truth. I gave him a brief history of the *Mafia* and that was all. I told him that the *Mafia* had been extinct several times, which was true."

Sam thought that over until they had left the club and were turning the corner of Michigan into Madison. Then he ex-

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claimed, "Yeah, but you said this guy Piper called himself Piper—"

"That's right, he did."

"He did what?"

"He called himself Piper, because that was his name."

"The way you said it to the old boy it sounded like he was a—a Italian."

"Speaking of Italians, Sam, what do you say we take a little run over to Little Italy?"

Sam grabbed Johnny's arm. No, Johnny, no, that's no place to go snooping around at night."

"Little Italy's no worse at night than any other place."

"But I know what you're figurin' on doing. I've seen it before. You're going to play detective and I'm going to get the hell beat out of me and we're going to wind up broke."

"We were broke this morning, Sam. Flat broke. Now, we've each got ninety cents in our pockets and we've had a couple of swell meals. But what about tomorrow?" Johnny shook his head. "We've no choice Elliott's going to give us away to his old man. We'll have no jobs tomorrow, unless I can give the old man something to sink his teeth into."

"So we lose our jobs? What of it? We never had jobs before."

"But we had books to sell. We haven't got any now and we won't have until we get a stake. This job's got to give us that stake." Johnny hesitated. "And don't forget, *you* found the murdered man and *my* leather knife was missing from my bench."

Sam gasped. "You mean they—they suspect one of us?"

"And how! We're walking the streets free men, but suppose the cops decide that we're a couple of likely suspects, in view of the fact that they can't pin the rap on anyone else. What then? We can't *prove* we didn't kill Al Piper."

"But we never even knew the guy!"

"There are innocent men in jail right now," said Johnny ominously.

Sam groaned. "All right, Johnny, we'll go down to Little Italy. But I'm not going to like it. I'm not going to like it at all. Those Black Hands—"

"Don't be silly!"

They walked to Wells Street and in a few minutes caught a northbound street car. They got off at Oak Street and walked west in one of the worst slum areas in the city of Chicago. It was still early evening and there were plenty of people on the street, men, women and children.

VIII

THEY crossed Sedgwick and the houses became even more dilapidated. Paint had not been used in the neighborhood, it seemed, since the turn of the century.

Johnny walked carelessly, like a man out for an evening stroll, but beside him Sam walked on the balls of his feet, tense and uneasy. He glanced apprehensively at open doorways.

They reached Milton Street and Johnny said, "Oak and Milton, the Death Corner."

Sam shuddered. "Cut it out, Johnny!"

Johnny cleared his throat. "Kind of warm. A glass of beer wouldn't go bad."

"I'm not thirsty," said Sam.

"Well, I am. And here's a place—Tavern and Pool Room. Come on."

Sam groaned audibly but followed Johnny into the place, which turned out to be a long narrow room with a bar at the front and four pool tables in the rear.

They stepped up to the bar, which was quite well patronized.

"A short beer," Johnny said to the olive-complected bartender.

"Me, too," said Sam.

The bartender drew the beer, leveled off the foam and set the glasses before Sam and Johnny.

Johnny took a sip of the beer. "Carmella been around?" he asked, casually.

"That's twenty cents," the bartender snapped.

Johnny put two dimes on the bar. "I asked if Carmella had been around tonight?"

"Carmella who?"

"Carmella Vitali."

The bartender pointed to a frame on the back bar mirror. "There's my license for the bar," he said. He pointed to the wall behind Johnny. "And there's the one for the pool tables. There are no rooms in back and if anybody's betting on the games, they're

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doing it on their own. I just rent 'em the tables."

Johnny returned the man's truculent look with interest. "The hell with your pool tables and your gambling. I merely asked you if a guy named Carmella Vitali's been around. I'm not a cop, if that's what's worrying you."

"So you ain't a cop, but I never saw you before and you come in asking for Carmella Somebody. I got a uncle named Carmella, but he can't be the guy you're looking for on account of he's been dead for twelve years and, anyway, he lived in Pittsburgh. He was born and raised in Pittsburgh and he died from gallopin' pneumonia."

Johnny gulped down the last of his beer and slammed the glass on the bar. "T'hell with you!" He signalled to Sam, who finished his beer and hurried after Johnny.

"What makes people so suspicious of everybody?" Johnny snarled as they resumed their walking down Oak Street.

"I dunno," said Sam, "but if somebody came around asking me about you, I'd figure they were after you for something."

"That's because somebody usually is after me, but all these people can't have somebody after them."

"Why not? Ain't somebody usually after somebody for somethin'?"

Before Johnny could reply to that sage remark, a man stepped out of a doorway.

"Hey!" he cried. "What're you fellows doin' around here?"

It was Joe Genara, the swarthy man who had helped Sam Cragg pile up the barrels that morning at the Towner leather plant.

"Hiyah, Joe," Sam responded. "We're just takin' a walk."

"You live around here?"

"No," said Johnny, "but since we've taken a job in the neighborhood, we thought we'd look around and get acquainted."

"With this neighborhood?" Joe wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Phooey! Ain't nothin' around here worth seeing."

"Maybe not, but the people are interesting."

"You kidding?"

Johnny shrugged. "You've lived here all your life, you can't see that your people are colorful. Carmella lives around here, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, sure," agreed Joe, then looked sharply at Johnny. "Carmella?"

"The lad the cops picked up for questioning about Al Piper."

Joe looked steadily at Johnny. "What're you driving at?"

"Nothing, only I'd like to meet Carmella."

"Why?"

"I got his job today. If he hadn't quit, I'd still be pounding the streets looking for work. I guess I owe Carmella a drink or two."

"I don't think he's in the mood to appreciate it, the way the cops gave him the one-two-three today."

"Maybe he needs cheering up."

Joe looked thoughtfully at Johnny, then glanced at Sam and a wicked grin spread over his features. "This might be fun, at that. I'll probably hate myself tomorrow, but—come on!"

He stepped to the curb and started across the street. Johnny and Sam followed. Joe led the way to a tavern and pool room that was almost a twin of the one they had been in a few minutes ago.

Joe passed the bar and proceeded down the line of pool tables. He stopped at the fourth and nodded to the last table.

"Go ahead, sports."

Carmella Vitali was just bending over the table. "Seven ball in the side pocket," he announced to an audience of four or five young men, all of whom had pool cues and stood around the table.

"Ten cents says you're crazy," one of the men exclaimed.

"Bet," said Carmella, laconically.

He took careful aim and hit the cue ball with his cue. It struck the seven ball at the far rail and banked it neatly into the side pocket. The player who had made his bet banged his cue on the floor.

"Lucky shot!" He tossed a dime to the green covered table and Carmella pocketed it. He looked around the table, found the eight ball almost concealed behind the eleven ball.

"Dime you can't make it," said Johnny.

Carmella looked around, spied Johnny and scowled "Private game."

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"That's all right," said Johnny. "I'm not playing, but just the same I got a dime says you can't make that shot."

"I said this was a private game," Carmella repeated sharply.

"Sure, but you just took a bet on an easy shot; this one's harder. I got a dime says you can't make it."

Carmella's mouth twisted in anger, then his eyes took in the balls on the table. "Wise guy," he sneered. "I got a buck says *you* can't make that shot."

Johnny stepped forward, stooped and scrutinized the balls closely. The eight ball could be hit all right, but if it was hit clean it would strike the twelve ball a few inches to the left. Of course, if it caromed off that ball just right, it would ricochet into the fifteen ball, which was blocking the corner pocket. No—not quite. The exact caroming from the fifteen ball could send the eight ball into the pocket. The shot was possible, but highly improbable.

Johnny straightened. "I think I'll just take that bet. Let me have your cue."

Carmella handed Johnny the cue, reached to the ball rack behind him and took down a piece of chalk. "All right, wise guy, make your shot."

Sam stepped up beside Johnny. "Ixnay, Johnny, you on'y got sixty cents."

"I know," Johnny said out of the corner of his mouth. "But you've got eighty. Besides—"

He bent over the table, aimed carefully and hit the cue ball with his cue. The cue ball jumped sideways and Johnny recoiled in horror.

Then he lunged for the chalk that he had set down upon the edge of the table. Carmella was already reaching for it, but Johnny beat him to it. One glance told him.

"You've got soap in this chalk!" Johnny cried.

Carmella snickered. "Any soap in that chalk, you put it there yourself. You talked yourself into something and you figured that was an out. Only it ain't. A buck, mister."

"Put the cue ball back where it was and I'll try the shot again," Johnny snapped. "I didn't put that soap in the chalk, and you know it."

"Calling me a liar?" Carmella demanded truculently.

Johnny looked at the semi-circle of Carmella's friends. Their threatening looks told him that they were ready and willing to back up Carmella. But the dollar meant the difference between beds that night or sleeping the railroad depots.

Johnny said, "I can make that shot."

"You didn't," snarled Carmella. "Now, give me that buck or so help me—"

Sam Cragg drew a deep breath and exhaled heavily. "Or what?" he asked.

"Who asked you to put in your two cents?"

"Nobody asked me," retorted Sam. "I'm puttin' in on my own. You outweigh Johnny thirty pounds. But I'm your size. You want to make something, pick on me."

"Belt him one, Carmella," suddenly urged one of Carmella's friends. "They're a couple of pool hustlers."

"Yeah," agreed Carmella. "I seen 'em somewhere. Can't remember where, but they been around."

"You saw us at the Towner factory this morning," Johnny said. "As a matter of fact I got your job, after you were fired."

"Who was fired? I—" Carmella's eyes suddenly narrowed and he whirled and caught a pool cue from a rack. As he was turning back, Sam sprang forward. He whisked the pool cue from the Italian's hand, smashed it down against the table, snapping it in two.

"So you want to play rough," Sam cried. "All right, try this for size."

He hit Carmella on the side of the head with his open hand. The blow travelled only a foot or so, but it sent Carmella sprawling four feet, so that he collided with the first of his friends who was charging around the table to get at Sam and Johnny.

The blow was like a match set to a short fuse on a giant firecracker. Carmella's friends roared and came swarming forward. Two on one side, one around the other side of the table and a fourth over the table itself.

Pool cues flashed. Johnny took one pool cue on his raised forearm and cried out in pain. A second cue, poked at his eye, missed by an inch and cut open the skin over his cheekbone. Johnny jerked that cue away from the wielder and without bothering

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to reverse, drove the heavy, leaded butt into the man's stomach, doubling him over and leaving him gasping in pain.

By that time Sam was engaged with his quota. He followed through on Carmella, grabbed him about the midriff and raising him clear slammed him into another man. Both went down to the floor. Sam hurdled them, caught another man in the crook of his arm and hugged him to his side. The victim belabored Sam with his fists and Sam hit him in the face, once. The man went limp, but Sam held him under his armpit. He turned, dragging the man with him to face Carmella and his ally getting up from the floor.

Sam whisked the unconscious man from under his arm, raised him to the height of his head and hurled him down on Carmella and his friend. The three men landed in a heap and did not get up.

Sam turned to go to Johnny's aid, found him exchanging blows. Johnny was doing fine, but Sam looked at the horde of men swarming to the rear of the room, from the other tables.

"Time to go, Johnny!" he cried. He ducked under Johnny's flailing arm, caught hold of his friend's antagonist and cuffing him with one hand scooped him up with the other. He raised him a good eighteen inches over his head, hurled him clear across a pool table in the general direction of the advancing crowd. The man took two or three others to the floor with him.

That was all there was to it. Johnny and Sam walked out of the poolroom without anyone else trying to molest them. And no one followed them out, not even Joe Genara.

On the sidewalk, they hurried to Milton, turned north and ran a block to Hobbie Street. There they scooted west and after a few minutes came out on Crosby Street. They walked quickly down Crosby and just as they reached Larrabee a streetcar came along. They boarded it.

The car had only a few passengers and Johnny and Sam had no trouble finding a seat. Johnny drew out a handkerchief and dabbed at the blood on cheek.

"Kind of warm for a minute," he admitted.

"Oh, it wasn't bad," said Sam. "Best workout I've had for quite a spell." He grinned. "Little Italy isn't so tough."

"It was a waste of time, though—and money. Now we've got to find a place to sleep—for a dollar and twenty cents."

They got off the streetcar on Madison and began walking westward. Johnny studied the signs along the way. There were plenty of "hotels", advertising rooms at $1.00 and $.75. At Canal the prices began to come down and soon they saw signs advertising rooms as low as 35 cents, but Johnny was not satisfied with the appearances of the places.

"Flea bags," he said.

"As long as they've got beds, I don't care," Sam said. "If we're going to get up at dawn to go to work I want to hit the hay."

They reached Halsted Street and turned south and in the second block found a freshly-painted sign, reading: "Private rooms, 30 cents."

"The sign's clean, anyway," said Johnny. "Let's bunk."

They entered a dimly lighted corridor and the smell of disinfectant struck their nostrils. A flight of stairs led to the second floor and a small cubicle, containing a chair, a small bench and a grilled window in the wall. A frowsy old man was behind the grilled window.

"Got a couple of nice rooms?" Johnny asked. "For thirty cents?"

"Thirty apiece," was the reply. "Only one person to a room."

"That's us, kid." Johnny slipped thirty cents under the grill and Sam followed the example.

The man slipped an open book under the wicket. "Gotta register."

Johnny signed the names, Glen Taylor and Henry Wallace, and returned the book. The clerk looked at the names. "Again?" He yawned. "Okay. Rooms 7 and 8, next floor."

"The sign said *private* rooms—where are the keys?" Johnny exclaimed.

"At the price we can't afford to lose keys. There's a bolt on the inside of every room. You can lock yourself in. But we ain't responsible for valuables."

"If we had valuables we wouldn't be staying here," Johnny retorted.

They climbed the stairs to the third floor

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and reached a narrow corridor, lighted by a single unshaded electric light bulb. On each side was a row of doors, some open, some closed. Johnny stepped to a door bearing the number 7.

Inside was an iron bedstead containing a mattress, an uncovered pillow and a ragged cotton pad. The room was one inch longer than the bed and two feet wider. It contained no other furnishings. The top of the cubicle was covered with the usual variety of chicken wire.

"Well," said Johnny, "it isn't the Palmer House, but I guess it's home, for tonight, anyway."

"Gee," said Sam, morosely, "we eat dinner with a zillionaire at the Lakeside Athletic Club and then we bed down at a dump like this."

Johnny exhaled wearily. "Who knows? Maybe tomorrow night we'll sleep out at Towner's home. A good night to you, Sam."

He stepped into Room 7, groped for the light switch and found there was none. Johnny swore under his breath, slammed the door shut and shot the shaky bolt. Then he threw himself upon the bed without even taking off his shoes.

He was asleep in five minutes.

IX

A MAN came along the corridor in the morning and banged on the doors. "Rise and shine," he roared. "Seven o'clock."

Johnny groaned and sat up on the bed. He blinked and shook his head to clear away the sleep. Then he saw where he was and got to his feet. He opened the door and stepped out into the hall, to meet Sam just coming out of his own room.

"Hey, you!" roared Sam at the man banging on the doors. "What's the idea, waking people in the middle of the night?"

"Everybody's got to be out by eight o'clock or pay extra," the man retorted.

"We've got to be at work by eight, Sam," exclaimed Johnny. "Come on." They hurried to the rear of the corridor where a sign over a door, said: "Lavatory."

Inside was a galvanized iron washtub and a couple of long gray towels, hanging from a nail. Being already dressed they had the edge on the other guests of the hotel and were washed before anyone else came into the room. The late risers would find the towels slightly soiled and rather wet.

They left the hotel and walked to Madison. Turning east, they found a restaurant where for fifteen cents apiece they had oatmeal, two stale rolls and coffee. That left them thirty cents, but Johnny decided that they ought to keep a small stake and they walked the two miles to the Towner leather factory, arriving there at three minutes to eight.

The office was deserted, those employees apparently not coming to work until nine o'clock. And the elevator was not running, so they were compelled to climb to the fifth floor.

They were just entering the counter department when the eight o'clock bell rang. All the counter sorters were at their benches, with one exception, Elliott Towner.

Joe Genera came up, grinning. "Hi, fellas, enjoy our neighborhood last night?"

"Where'd you disappear to?" Johnny asked suspiciously.

"I watched it from the sidelines. Wasn't my fight. If I were you I wouldn't go walking around Oak and Milton tonight. Carmella and his gang are ready for you." He winked at Sam Cragg. "Nice exhibition, Sam."

"I didn't even get warmed up," said Sam.

Hal Johnson came into the sorting department from between two rows of barrels. "Break it up," he snapped. "The bell rang five minutes ago."

Genara scurried to his bench and Sam went off, scowling, Johnny grabbed up a couple of counters but Johnson remained at his side. "You're a disturbing influence, Fletcher," he said. "I'm beginning to think I made the mistake of my life hiring you. Who hit you in the face?"

Johnny touched the broken skin on his cheek.

"Had a little trouble with the Black Hand last night."

"The Black Hand! Are you crazy?"

"The *Mafia*—"

JOHNSON made an angry gesture. "Don't tell me about the *Mafia*. I grew up in this neighborhood. There hasn't been any *Mafia*—" He stopped, looked suspi-

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ciously at Johnny. "You been listening to Karl Kessler?"

"He did mention something about the Black Hand."

Johnson snorted in disgust. "Karl's got the Black Hand on the brain. Every time an Italian gets into an argument or a fight, he sees the Black Hand." He shook his head. "I don't know what you're doing, working in a factory, Fletcher, but you look like a man with a fair amount of intelligence."

"Thanks, Boss!"

"Ah-h-rr!"

Johnson made an impatient brushing motion and walked off. Chuckling, Johnny began to sort counters.

Ten minutes later, Karl Kessler, his face red, came up beside Johnny and began to look over his bunched counters. "What's the idea tellin' Hal Johnson I said the Black Hand killed Al Piper?" he demanded.

"Johnson told you I said that?" Johnny asked, in surprise.

"He said you told him I was talking about the Black Hand."

"Well, you were, yesterday."

"But I didn't say the Black Hand killed Al Piper. Al wasn't a guinea and guineas only kill guineas in the Black Hand."

"Look, Karl," said Johnny, patiently, "Johnson came along and asked me who gave me this mouse on the face and I said the Black Hand, that's all. It was a joke, like some fellows would say they bumped into a door when they got a black eye."

Kessler examined Johnny's face with interest. "Who smacked you?"

"A guy," said Johnny. "I stuck my nose in his business."

"Yeah, that's what you get for sticking your nose into somebody else's business."

"I just said that."

"So you did and it's a good thing to remember." Karl pushed back a nest of counters. "These are okay for mediums."

Johnny was about to say that the counters were heavies, but Karl Kessler trotted off and Johnny moved the bunch of counters over to the medium side.

He sorted a few counters, then became aware that Swenson, the old Dane, was casting furtive glances his way. "Ahoy, mate," Johnny called to him.

"No yob for a young man," the old sea dog said, shaking his head. "Should start a business. No future workin' with your hands. Kessler, Johnson, thirty-nine years one yob. They never see the world. Me, I have been in Rome, Cairo, Sydney, Shanghai—"

"And now you're workin' here."

"I get beached. Unlucky, but I have seen the world. I got memories."

"So have I," said Johnny.

"What memories young fellow have?"

"I'm the world's greatest book salesman," said Johnny, cheerfully. "I've made fifty thousand dollars a year. One year I made more money than the President of the United States."

"Yah!" jeered Swenson, "and I am Lord Nelson one time."

"Okay," said Johnny, "you have your dreams and I'll have mine. I don't suppose you'd believe that I had dinner with Mr. Towner last night, yes, the Leather Duke himself."

"Yah!" snorted Swenson. "I'm thinking you're world's biggest liar!"

Hal Johnson came striding from the direction of his desk, his face as dark as a thunderhead. "Fletcher," he cried. "I just got a phone call from the office. Mr. Harry Towner wants you to come right down."

Johnny nodded casually. "Thanks, Boss!" He winked at Swenson, whose mouth had fallen open.

"What's it all about?" cried Johnson.

"Tell you later," said Johnny easily, "mustn't keep Harry waiting, you know."

Johnson struck his forehead with his open palm and leaned against Johnny's desk for support. He watched Johnny walk off.

Johnny rode down to the first floor in the elevator and approached Nancy Miller's desk. "Morning, Taffy," he greeted her. "Where'll I find Harry?"

"Harry?" gasped Nancy. "Have you gone completely goofy?"

"Not at all, Taffy, Harry wants to see me."

"*Mister* Towner?"

"That's right, The Duke himself. Guess he wants to ask me a few things about the leather business. I told him last night at the club that he ought to make a few changes around here and—"

ELLIOTT TOWNER came out of an office, some twenty feet away. "Fletcher!" he called. "Here—"

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"Ah, the young Duke," exclaimed Johnny. "See you later, Taffy."

He breezed past Nancy's desk and headed for Elliott Towner. "How're you this morning, El?" Johnny asked as he came up.

"*I'm* fine," Elliott replied grimly. "But I don't know how *you'll* feel in a few minutes." He stepped aside so that Johnny could enter The Leather Duke's office.

It was a big room, some twenty-four by thirty feet in size. It had a rug about three inches thick and some hand-carved teakwood furniture. Harry Towner sat behind an enormous desk, a fat cigar in his mouth. Elliott came into the office behind Johnny and closed the door.

"Mr. Fletcher," began Harry Towner, "I see you've a bruise on your face this morning. Something go wrong with your little stakeout last night?"

"Oh, nothing much, Mr. Towner," replied Johnny easily. "Hardly worth mentioning. Six or seven men attacked Cragg and me, but it didn't amount to much."

"No, I don't suppose so, since there were only six or seven. But let's get to the point, Fletcher; about this *Mafia* business—"

"Yes?"

Harry Towner puffed mightily on his cigar three or four times, sending out clouds of smoke that should have warned Johnny. "I want a short answer, Fletcher, a yes or a no, if it's possible for you to use those words. Are you, or are you not, an undercover man?"

"Why, Mr. Towner," exclaimed Johnny. "Whoever gave you the idea that I was an undercover man? I'm a counter sorter here at this factory. I'm employed up on the fifth floor."

"Yes or no!" roared The Leather Duke.

"Yes," said Johnny.

"Yes, what? You're an undercover man?"

"No. Yes, I'm a counter sorter."

Towner took the cigar from his mouth and laid it carefully on the edge of an ashtray. He placed his hands flat on his desk. "Now, answer the next question briefly, not with a yes or no, but briefly—why did you come to see me at the club last night?"

"Why, I didn't come to see you, sir. Sam and I went to the club to call on Mr. Elliott and the doorman happened to phone you. I had asked for Mr. Towner, and—"

"I'm trying to be patient, Fletcher," Harry Towner said thickly. "So answer me *briefly*—please! Why did you want to see Elliott?"

"Because of one of your company rules, Mr. Towner."

The Leather Duke pressed down hard on the top of his desk with his hands. "There's a company rule about calling at the Lakeside Club?"

"Oh, no, that isn't what I meant. There's a company rule about giving employees an advance on their salaries. You see, Sam and I are stony and since Mr. Elliott was kind enough to buy us our lunches yesterday, we thought, well—"

"No!" whispered Harry Towner. "No, no, no!"

"Yes," said Johnny. "We came to the club for one reason only, to get Mr. Elliott to buy us our dinners."

"It's true, Dad, "exclaimed Elliott Towner. "They practically invited me to have lunch with them yesterday, then when the checks came they insisted I pay for them. Made quite a scene at the little place across the street."

"No, no," said Johnny, "that wasn't a scene. I merely pointed out that it wouldn't be good company policy to allow a couple of Towner employees to spend all afternoon washing dishes, inasmuch as—"

"Fletcher," said the Leather Duke, "that business about the Black Hand—"

"Words, Mr. Towner. To keep your mind occupied until the dinners came. But I told you only the truth, sir. About the Black Hand and—about us. I said we were working here as laborers. We are. I gave you a history of the Black Hand, a true history. If you misunderstood——"

Harry Towner suddenly pushed back his big chair and got to his feet. "Wait, Fletcher. Be still for ten seconds. Don't say another word."

He turned his back to Johnny and smacked his right fist into the palm of his left hand. Johnny looked at Elliott Towner, smiled weakly. The Leather Duke's son gave him a bleak look in return.

X

FOR thirty seconds the only sound in the room was the heavy breathing of The Leather Duke. Then he turned.

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"That story you just told me about how you got that bruise, Fletcher—"

"The truth, sir. After we left you last night, Sam and I rode up to Little Italy; we went into a poolroom and I got into an argument with Carmella. He and four or five of his friends attacked us. As a matter of fact, I can prove that. There was a witness, a man who works up in the counter department—"

"His name?"

"Joe Genara."

Harry Towner stabbed at his son with a forefinger. "Go upstairs, Elliott. Ask this Genara man—"

"All right, Dad," said Elliott. He started for the door, but as he opened it, Towner called. "Wait!"

He turned back to Johnny. "You'd let him go up and ask?"

"Of course, sir."

"All right, Elliott," Towner said, "never mind." He drew a deep breath. "All right, Fletcher, let's have it. Why are you here?"

"Why, you asked me to come down and—"

"There you go with your words again," Towner snapped. "You know very well that wasn't what I meant. Why are you working here at this factory?"

"Because I'm broke. Actually, I'm a book salesman."

"A salesman!"

"The world's greatest and I'm not bragging when I say that, Mr. Towner."

"No, I don't think you are. You certainly sold me last night." Towner picked up his cigar and puffed on it. "A salesman, eh?" He suddenly flicked a switch on an inter-office communication system and leaning over his desk, barked out, "Come in here, Edgar!" He shut off the inter-com and looked thoughtfully at Johnny.

"I've always prided myself upon being a judge of character," he said to Johnny. "I thought I had you sized up last night, but if I've made a mistake—"

He stopped as the door opened and a completely bald, heavy-set man came into the room.

"Mr. Bracken, our sales manager. Edgar, this is Mr. Fletcher, one of our counter sorters."

At the beginning of Towner's introduction, Mr. Bracken came forward, hand out, a smile on his face, but at the final announcement of Johnny's status the smile disappeared from his face, the hand fell and Mr. Bracken came to a halt.

"Yes, Mr. Towner," he said, puzzled.

"Mr. Fletcher," Towner went on, "tells me he's a salesman. I'm going to give him a tryout. I want you to give him some counter samples and an order blank. He's going to call on the John B. Croft Shoe Company and get an order for some counters."

"The John B. Croft Company!" exclaimed Mr. Bracken. "But, Mr. Towner, you know——"

"Yes, I know, "cut in Towner, "they buy lots of counters. They make a poor grade of shoes, but still they use counters in them and we sell counters. All grades and all prices. Well, Fletcher, do you think you can get an order of counters?"

"And if I sell them?"

Harry Towner shrugged. "You won't be working upstairs."

Johnny grimaced. "Has this company ever sold the John B. Croft Shoe Company any counters?"

"Oh, yes!"

"How long ago?"

"How long is it, Mr. Bracken?"

The sales manager gulped. "Uh, twelve years."

"I see," said Johnny. He drew a deep breath. "Give me the samples."

Mr. Bracken looked at Harry Towner. The Leather Duke nodded grimly. "Give him the samples, Mr. Bracken. And the order blanks."

"And a small expense account, Mr. Towner," Johnny said. "I haven't even got carfare."

"Oh, you won't need carfare, Fletcher. They're only a few blocks from here. But you're right, a little expense money is only fair. Bracken, give him ten dollars. You're going to call on them now, Fletcher?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll be waiting here to find out how you made out."

Bracken started to leave the office and Johnny followed. As he passed Elliott he heard a distinct snicker.

Bracken led Johnny into a small office near Elliott's. When Johnny had entered the sales manager closed the door.

"I don't know what this is all about,

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Fletcher," he said, "but I feel that I should tell you that there is great enmity between the John B. Croft Company and this firm."

"Oh, sure, I gathered that."

"John B. Croft has a standing order in his place that anyone from the Towner Company should be thrown out the moment they set foot in their factory. You'd only be wasting time calling there. If you're wise you'll take the ten dollars in lieu of your salary here—"

"I'll take the samples, too. And the order blanks."

Bracken looked at Johnny a moment, then shaking his head, went to a long table and picked up a leather salesman's kit. He handed it to Johnny.

"It's your funeral."

JOHNNY opened the kit, took out two leather counters and stuffed them into his pocket. He picked up an order pad and tore off two sheets, which he folded and put into his breast pocket. "Now if you'll give me the expense money—"

Mr. Bracken took out his wallet and extracted a ten-dollar bill. "Goodbye, Fletcher," he said.

"See you in a little while," Johnny said. He gave the sales manager a half salute and left the office.

He stopped at Nancy Miller's desk.

"Fired?" she asked.

"Promoted. I'm now a salesman. I'm going over to get an order from the John B. Croft Company."

She gasped. "Somebody's ribbing you."

"The Duke. He says if I get an order from Croft I can have any job in the place."

"But thats it, Johnny," Nancy said, tautly. "You *can't* get an order from the Croft Company. Harry Towner and John B. Croft are deadly enemies."

"I'm doing it because of you, Taffy," Johnny said, dramatically. "You said you wouldn't go out with a laborer, so I'm trying to become a white-collar man, a salesman."

"You're crazy, Johnny," Nancy said, softly. "Crazy, but I like you. Only—"

"I shall return," said Johnny, and walked out of the office.

But out on the street, some of his confidence ebbed from him. He walked north on Division Street and turned east. At the corner of Latrabee, he stopped for five minutes and had almost decided to give it up when his eye caught a sign over a store on the other side of the street. ASSISTANCE LEAGUE.

On a sudden impulse he crossed the street and entered the store. On the inside it looked like an orderly junk shop. Secondhand clothing in all stages of wear and tear hung from racks. Rusted tools and hardware were spread out on counters. Near the rear of the shop was a counter piled high with old shoes. In front of the counter stood four wooden barrels, all filled with old shoes.

A thin, pale man who looked like a reformed boozer, blocked Johnny's path. "Something for you?"

"Shoes," Johnny said. "Size nine and a half."

The clerk pointed at one of the counters. "Here you are, but we don't guarantee the sizes."

"Good enough, I'll guess."

Ten minutes later Johnny showed the attendant two objects that had once been shoes. The uppers were cracked and worn, the toe of one shoe had a half-inch split and the soles of both had become loosened. In one was a hole clear through.

"How much?" Johnny asked.

The attendant had the grace to blush. "Why, ah, where did you find those?"

"In the barrel. Not very good, are they?"

"We're supposed to sort them out before we put them on sale," said the clerk. "We make it a rule to sell only wearable merchandise."

"Do you think these are wearable?"

"Well, I suppose there's *some* wear in them—"

"Look," said Johnny. He took hold of the sole of one of the shoes, yanked suddenly and ripped it halfway down. "Is it wearable now?"

"No, but you—"

"I know," cut in Johnny. "But what would you say they were worth before I did?"

"I'm supposed to get fifty cents a pair, but—"

"That's a deal," said Johnny, "if you'll wrap them up—in a newspaper."

The clerk wrapped them and then there was some difficulty about making change for

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the ten-dollar bill, but it was finally managed by going next door to the drug store. At length, Johnny was back on Division Street, with a newspaper-wrapped parcel under his arm.

He crossed Milton and looked apprehensively off to the right in the direction of Oak Street a couple of blocks away, but continued on up Division. A few minutes later he came to the plant of the John B. Croft Shoe Company, a modern six-story brick building. He entered.

The reception room was lined with pine paneling and had a nice pine desk in one corner behind which sat an attractive red-headed girl. Two men were seated in leather armchairs, apparently awaiting the pleasure of Croft executives.

"Mr. Croft," Johnny said to the receptionist. "John B."

"You have an appointment?"

"No," said Johnny. "I have no appointment."

"Mr. Croft never sees anyone without an appointment."

"Tell him that Mr. Fletcher is calling."

"You're a personal friend?"

"No."

"Then I'm afraid it wouldn't be of any use. Mr. Croft *never* sees anyone without an appointment."

"Tell him that Mr. Fletcher wants to see him."

"If you could tell me the nature of your business—"

"Personal."

"But you just said that you didn't know him."

"I don't, but my business is personal. Tell him——"

The redhead winced and picked up her phone. "Just a moment, I'll see if his secretary will see you." She spoke into her phone: "Miss Williams, there's a man here insists on seeing Mr. Croft. He says it's personal and—yes, I know, but could you come out?" She hung up. "Miss Williams will be out."

Miss Williams came presently. She was short and stout and wore a pince-nez. "You want to see Mr. Croft?" she asked, loftily. "What is it about?"

"I told this beautiful red-headed young lady that my business with Mr. Croft was personal."

"I'm Mr. Croft's confidential secretary. I can't interrupt him unless you tell me the nature of your business."

Johnny said, firmly, "You know all about Mr. Croft's affairs, eh? Well, just go in and tell him that Mr. Fletcher is here and wants to see him. Fletcher. F-l-e-t-c-h-e-r. Just tell him Fletcher and tell him to think hard. And tell him I'll wait three minutes. No more. Got that, girlie? The name is Fletcher and I'll wait three minutes."

The confidential secretary looked at Johnny, startled, then realized that she was wasting precious seconds and hurried off. She returned in two minutes and forty-five seconds. She held open the door.

"Will you come in, please?"

Johnny went down a wide hall, into a reception room at the end. The stout secretary hurried up from behind him and opened a paneled door.

Johnny went in.

John B. Croft's office was as large as Harry Towner's, but instead of teakwood, he favored dark mahogany. He was a little man, little, fat and balding. He was perspiring lightly.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Fletcher?" he asked, a bit nervously.

Johnny nodded, crossed the room and sat down in a leather-covered chair some five feet from the shoe manufacturer. He placed the newspaper parcel carefully on his lap and looked at John B. Croft.

John B. Croft cleared his throat, coughed and cleared his throat a second time. "I, ah, I'm afraid I can't place you, Mr. ah, Fletcher, isn't it?"

"Fletcher," said Johnny.

Mr. Croft concentrated hard and his face showed a little more perspiration. "What is, ah, the nature—I mean, what did you want to see me about?"

Johnny waited about thirty seconds, then said, quietly: "You've got a very nice business here, Mr. Croft."

Mr. Croft wiped his forehead with the back of a pudgy hand. "Shall we, ah, uh, come to the point, Mr. Fletcher? I don't imagine you came here to talk about the shoe business."

Johnny pursed up his lips into a great pout and held it a moment. Then he carefully picked up the parcel from his lap and broke the string. He folded the string and

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put it in his pocket. Mr. Croft's eyes were glued upon the package.

Johnny opened the paper cautiously, picked up one of the ancient, battered shoes, then the other. He rose from his chair, stepped to Mr. Croft's desk and placed the shoes carefully upon it. The shoe manufacturer stared at the shoes a long moment, looked at Johnny, then back at the shoes and finally again at Johnny. There was an inquiry in his eyes.

"Shoes," said Johnny.

Croft ran the tip of his tongue about his lips. "I—I don't understand."

"Look at them."

CROFT reached out a hand, hesitated, then touched one of the shoes gingerly. Since it didn't explode in his face, he picked up the shoe and stared at it. He shot a look at Johnny, then looked back at the shoe. He touched the sole that was pulled away from the uppers and then suddenly switched the shoe around and looked at the inside of the heel.

"A Croft," he said, tentatively.

"A Croft shoe," agreed Johnny.

A drop of perspiration fell from Mr. Croft's face to the back of his hand, causing him to twitch.

"Feel the counters," suggested Johnny.

Mr. Croft felt them. "Broken down."

"Pretty badly," agreed Johnny.

"I—I don't get the point," said Croft, nervously.

Johnny reached into his side pocket and bringing out his two sample counters, placed them carefully beside the battered wrecks of Croft shoes.

"Counters," he said.

Mr. Croft put down the shoe, picked up the counters. He felt them, looked questioningly at Johnny. Johnny pursed up his lips again.

"You never heard my name, Mr. Croft?" he asked, quietly.

"N-no, no, I don't think so. At least I can't remember. I—I have a bad memory for names and faces."

"I guess you have, Mr. Croft." Johnny took the order blanks from his pocket, unfolded them and carefully removed the creases.

Then he spread the blanks out on Mr. Croft's desk. Mr. Croft took one startled look at them and returned his gaze to Johnny's face.

Johnny nodded slowly. "I'd like to sell you some counters, Mr. Croft."

"Harry Towner," Croft whispered.

"I beg your pardon?"

"How many?" exclaimed Croft, flicking sweat from his face, with a shaking hand.

"Oh, about ten barrels of 2 MOXO and—" Johnny hesitated, "say, ten barrels of 2 MOXOO— Could I use your pen?"

"S-sure—"

Johnny got up, took Mr. Croft's ball pen from the desk set and wrote out the order. He handed the pen to Croft. "Now, if you'll just sign."

Croft signed his name eagerly and handed the pen back to Johnny. Johnny returned it to the pen stand. He folded up the order blank.

"Thank you, Mr. Croft."

"Uh, th-thank you, Mr. Fletcher." Then, as Johnny started for the door. "What about these—shoes?"

Johnny looked back and smiled faintly. "Oh, that's all right, Mr. Croft. There won't be any trouble—*now*." He smiled again and opened the door.

In the outer office, he nodded gravely to Miss Williams and walked through.

When he reached the sidewalk it was Johnny's turn to perspire.

XI

IT WAS five minutes to twelve when Johnny re-entered the offices of the Towner Leather Company. Nancy Miller gasped when she saw him.

"You came back!"

"Of course. I said I'd return, didn't I?"

"But it's all around the office—Mr. Towner sent you out on an impossible mission."

"Impossible?" asked Johnny. "I don't know the meaning of the word."

"But you were going to call at the John B. Croft—"

"I went," said Johnny. "I saw Croft. I got an order."

"No!"

"Yes! Now, stick around, Taffy, and when I come out of the Duke's office, I'll have some good news for you—about our date." Johnny winked at Nancy and strode

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to Edgar Bracken's office. He stuck in his head.

"Edgar!"

Bracken looked up from his work, his eyes widening in shock. Johnny crooked a finger at him. "Come, Ed!"

He strode to Harry Towner's office and without knocking, pushed open the door. Towner was just hanging up his telephone receiver.

"Fletcher!" he exclaimed. "What the devil?"

Bracken padded into the room behind Johnny, came to a halt, just within the door, ready for instant flight. Johnny strode across the room, drawing out the Croft order.

"Salesman Fletcher reporting, Mr. Towner!" He unfolded the order blank and held it so that Towner could look at it.

Towner kicked back his chair, sprang to his feet and tore the order from Johnny's hand. "Twenty barrels!" he roared. "Where'd you get this?"

"From the Croft Shoe Company—naturally. That's John B. Croft's signature."

"It's a forgery!"

"Mr. Towner!" Johnny said, indignantly. "This is another of your stunts, but you're not going to get away with it. You think I won't call Croft—"

"Go right ahead, sir."

Towner regarded Johnny suspiciously. "This order is genuine?"

"Of course, it is. Mr. Croft signed it himself. A little, fat, bald-headed guy."

"That's Croft, all right. But—" Towner's eyes slitted. "How did you get it?"

"Why, I just went into his office and asked him for an order for counters and he gave it to me. That's all there was to it."

Towner grabbed up his telephone. "Get me John B. Croft," he snarled.

JOHNNY strolled to one of the chairs and seated himself carelessly. Then Croft was on the wire. "Croft," snapped Harry Towner. "I have an order here for twenty barrels of counters, signed by you. . . . What. . . . You *did* sign it? . . . What's that. . . ? I don't know what the hell you're talking about, Croft. The same to you, in spades! . . ." He listened for a moment, his eyes screwed up in a frown. ". . . You signed the order? That's all I wanted to know. You'll get the counters and you'll pay for them, too!" He slammed the receiver back on the prongs and looked ominously at Fletcher.

"What really happened, Fletcher?" he asked, slowly. "The truth—"

"The truth, Mr. Towner. I asked to see Mr. Croft and when I got into his office I asked him—"

"Croft mumbled something about an old pair of shoes and—blackmail."

"Blackmail? I don't know what he's talking about." Johnny suddenly grinned. "All right, Mr. Towner, the truth. I stopped in at a second-hand store on Division. I bought the worst-looking pair of Croft shoes I could find. Props. They gave me the appointment business at Croft's office. I scared the hell out of them. Not by what I said, but the way I said it. Significant pauses, emphasis upon my name. I told Croft's secretary I'd wait three minutes, no more. Perfectly true; if he wouldn't see me in three minutes, he wouldn't see me at all. Croft saw me. I went into his office and sat down and let him carry the ball. He's got a guilty conscience—most men have, you know. At one time or another they've taken out a little lady they oughtn't to have taken out. Or something. So I just sat there and let Croft get himself all worked up. Then I opened the package containing the shoes and let him look at them. Then I showed him two of our counters and asked him if he wanted to buy some. I could have made out the order for a hundred barrels, but I let him off easy. Of course, if you insist I'll go back and get the other eighty barrels."

"No," said Towner, thickly. "It won't be necessary. You proved your point. You're a salesman."

"I told you I was."

"So you did. You sold John Croft, but you've sold a tougher man than he, you sold me. You passed the test. I'm not going to say a word about your methods. I gave you an impossible assignment and you proved that it wasn't impossible. I guess your methods were justified. Now—the reward. Name it, Fletcher!"

Johnny looked thoughtfully at his hands, then shifted his glance to Edgar Bracken. The little sales manager cringed visibly. "How much does your job pay, Mr. Bracken?"

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"S-seven thousand a year," stammered the sales manager.

Lieutenant Lindstrom appeared in the office door behind Bracken. "Excuse me, gentlemen," he began, then saw Johnny and scowled. "You, Fletcher, just the man I want to see."

"Here we go again!" sighed Johnny.

"What is it, Lieutenant?" demanded Harry Towner, impatiently. "More questions?"

Lieutenant Lindstrom drew a notebook from his pocket. "Last night, at eight forty-three this man and his big friend entered a poolroom on Oak Street. They got into a quarrel with Carmella Vitali and started a riot."

"I know about that, Lieutenant," said the Leather Duke. "He told me."

Lindstrom's eyes narrowed. "I had a man shadowing Carmella. What I want to know is—why did *you* go there last night?"

"I wanted to pump him," said Johnny.

"About what?"

"Now, look, Lieutenant, let's not be cute. There was a murder here yesterday."

"I haven't forgotten it," Lindstrom said, grimly. "Nor have I forgotten that your leather knife was missing. And I haven't forgotten the coincidence of your starting to work here the morning of a murder and your poking your nose into Carmella's business."

"Lieutenant," said Johnny, drawing a deep breath. "Do you know *who* murdered Al Piper?"

"I don't at this minute, but—"

"Do you know *why* he was killed?"

"No, but—"

"*You* don't know, Lieutenant," Johnny interrupted. "And *I* don't know. But I think I'll know before you do." He turned to Harry Towner. "Mr. Towner, this affair isn't helping the business any, is it?"

"Our stock dropped four points this morning," snapped Towner. "I want this mess cleaned up as quickly as possible. I mean that, Lieutenant. I talked to the mayor a half hour ago."

"I know you did, Mr. Towner. I got a call from Headquarters ten minutes ago. But you've got to cooperate with the police, Mr. Towner. You can't protect your employees, just because—"

"I'm not protecting anyone," Towner said, curtly. "You get proof that someone committed this crime and you'll find me backing you, to the last dollar I've got."

"I may hold you to that," the lieutenant said stiffly and walked out. As he left the office he had to step aside for someone who came swinging in.

Linda Towner.

"Dad," she said, then saw Johnny. "Mr. Fletcher, I was hoping to run into you. I thought perhaps you could talk me into buying your lunch."

Johnny grinned. "There's been a slight change in my situation since last night."

"Oh, you talked Dad out of firing you? I was tempted to make a bet with Dad that you would, but then you see I know him so much better than I know you."

"Be quiet a minute Linda," growled Harry Towner. "I have a discussion to conclude with Mr. Fletcher." Towner cleared his throat noisily and glared at Edgar Bracken. "You say you want Bracken's job, Fletcher?"

"Me? I wouldn't touch it. A sales manager sits in his office all day. I wouldn't like that."

"The counter sorters sit at a bench all day," said Towner. "Although sometimes they stand."

OUT in the factory, bells rang signalling the lunch hour.

"Excuse me a moment," Johnny exclaimed and left the office. He strode to Nancy Miller's desk, handed her a couple of dollars. "I'm in a big conference, Taffy," he said, "but hand this money to my pal, Sam Cragg, as he comes out. Tell him to have a good lunch and I'll see him afterwards."

"Conference with the duchess?" asked Nancy.

"The Duke. I've already turned down the sales manager's job."

"You're kidding!"

"Uh-uh, I'm going to get something bigger. Tell you about it, later."

He patted her shoulder and returned to Towner's office. In his absence, Edgar Bracken had slipped out.

"All right, Fletcher," said Harry Towner. "What job do you consider better than the sales manager's?"

"Factory detective. I want to devote my

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full time to finding the murderer of Al Piper."

"But the police will take care of that," protested Towner.

"Maybe they will," said Johnny, "and maybe they won't. They've got a lot of cases to solve. Besides, they're police and people clam up when a policeman's around. Me, I'm one of the boys, a counter sorter like the rest of them. I've an unusual knack of stirring things up."

"So I've noticed," offered Linda Towner. "That's one of the reasons I like you."

"Linda!" exclaimed her father.

Johnny chuckled. "Why don't we talk it over at lunch?"

"Can't," said Harry Towner. "I'm having lunch at the club with some of the directors of my tannery."

"Well, I'm not," declared Linda. *"I'm* having lunch at the Fluttering Duck."

"That's a coincidence," exclaimed Johnny. "I was planning to have lunch at the Fluttering Duck myself. That is, I was going to have lunch there if I settled this little business with Mr. Towner."

"It's settled," said Towner. "I think you're making a mistake turning down the sales manager's job, but perhaps we can talk about that again, after this mess is cleared up." He grunted. "I have an idea you'll do as well as the police."

"I won't do any worse." Johnny coughed gently. "It's customary for a detective to get a retainer. Five hundred, shall we say?"

"Five hundred!" cried Harry Towner.

"And say, another five hundred when I hand you the murderer."

Harry Towner opened his mouth to blast Johnny, but suddenly shook his head and reached for his wallet. "All right, that order you got amounted to around three thousand. A five-hundred-dollar commission isn't too much."

"The order is for free," said Johnny, "you're paying me for detective work."

"Call it anything you like. Here's your money."

He handed Johnny four one-hundred-dollar bills and two fifties.

"My car's outside," said Linda Towner.

Nancy Miller had apparently gone out to lunch, for her desk was vacant. Johnny was just as glad that she did not see him leaving with Linda Towner.

Parked at the curb, in the only available space—in front of a fire hydrant—stood a canary yellow convertible Cadillac.

"You drive?" Linda asked Johnny.

"Only jalopies," replied Johnny. "Those fenders are too big for me."

She got in behind the wheel and Johnny climbed in beside her. She started in second gear and by the time she reached the next corner was doing 45.

"That wild story you told Dad last night," Linda said, "was that really just to get a free dinner?"

"Yes and no. We needed the dinner, but more than that I needed to sell myself to your father. One day of sorting counters was about enough."

Linda laughed. "Dad didn't want to believe it, even after Elliott told him what you had done to him at lunch. And now you talked Dad into believing you're a detective."

"It so happens that that's one thing I'm good at," Johnny declared. "For instance, did you know that the man in the black Chevvie's having an awful time keeping up with us? Don't turn around. Look in the rear-vision mirror."

Linda followed his order. "There's a black coupe behind us, all right, but what makes you think it's following us?"

"Turn left at the next corner."

Linda gunned the motor of the Cadillac, then made a left turn that caused the tires to screech. Johnny, looking in the mirror, saw the black Chevrolet careen wildly as it almost missed the turn.

"Now make a complete turn around the block and get us back on Larrabee," Johnny said. "If he's still with us, then he's following."

Three minutes later they were back at their starting point and the black Chevrolet was seventy feet behind them. "Okay," said Johnny, "he's following us."

"I can lose him," cried Linda.

"What's the good of that? Then I'd only worry about him. Continue on to the Fluttering Duck."

(*Part III in the next* SHORT STORIES)

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The More Harmless a Bad Enemy Seems to Be, the Worse He Really Is. And a Gunman Is One Who Has to Know!

A GUNMAN'S ENEMY

By CADDO CAMERON

FAR'S I'm concerned, there's good enemies and bad enemies. For instance, the law is a good enemy because it don't make no secret of the fact that it's out to get me for my cussedness and I can't blame it a particle. Likewise, there's a smatterin' of badmen here and yander who swear they'd give a pretty to cut me down. I don't hold that against them, though, for they've mostly come out second best when we've tangled in times past and they got a perfect right to try to get square, so I call them good stand-up-and-fight enemies. Snakes are good enemies,

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too. Take copperheads, moccasins and rattlers and you know where to look out for them, they're poison and admit it and don't never try to fool you into thinkin' they ain't got fangs and you can figure they'll shoot on sight, so snakes are honest enemies.

But genuine *bad* enemies ain't got none of these good points. They're always two-legged critters and that's all you ever know for certain about them, because they come in every size, shape and color and they never look or behave like enemies until they slip a knife between your ribs while your back is turned or when you're a-sleepin' innocent. What I mean—the more harmless a bad enemy seems to be, the worse he really is. How come I know so much about 'em?

It happens like this.

Along towards noon one hot day in July I'm a-headin' north across The Chickasaw Nation, a-straddle of a rode-out horse and I'm keepin' an eye on my back-trail. Down at Refuge Spring on the north bank of the Red two days ago I tangle with three of Blackie Baker's men and my chestnut gets shot from under me, then it taken me all of a day and a half to find this here bay I'm a-forkin' and buy it from a mixed-blood farmer for twice what it's worth. I'd be better off afoot. You know how it is, though—a fella won't walk so long as he's got anything to ride, no matter how sorry it is. But I've got to get clean away from this country and lay low some place until Baker and his bunch run down or cool off.

Blackie Baker is bad medicine. He makes out to be a tinhorn gambler, but I happen to know that Blackie is one of the chiefs—if not *the* chief—of a horse-stealin' bunch that operates in Northeast Texas and The Nations, and any stranger you meet down here is likely to be hooked up with him. They've got a grapevine that carries news all-fired fast. After me takin' so long to find a horse—by this time it's generally known up and down the trails that I bucked Blackie's crooked faro game with a six-shooter in the old Texas town of Gainesville a short time back and collected what he taken off'n me, together with a thousand percent interest for the use of my money while he had it. Blackie was put out by that—told me so himself.

As I recollect it, while he was lookin' my Colt in the eye, part of what he said went somethin' like this, "Gunman, you're makin' a dumb play. Maybe you're as good as they say you are, but you can't stick *me* up and get away with it. I'll make every inch of you suffer a-plenty."

Considerin' that I'm six and half feet tall, that means I'll do a heap of sufferin' if Blackie makes good, and right now I wouldn't swear that he won't. I can't recognize his men when I run onto 'em, but everybody can spot me by my hawk face and long-geared frame, so the safest place for me ain't where I'm at now—not by a hundred mile or so.

While I'm a-thinkin' all this, the bay stumps his toe and mighty nigh goes down. Pore cuss! He can't help it because he ain't much horse. Besides, I know he's a scrub when I buy him, so it's my fault and damned if I'll kill him when he's doin' the best he can. I rein in at the crest of a rise, swing off into a clump of shinoak and breathe the bay while I sorta look the country over from cover and do some important figurin'.

What I need to do is to get to the wild country northeast of here, or better still—clean on to my hideout in the brakes of the Canadian. But I'll never get there on this nag. Of course, I *could* lay for some rider and maybe make a six-shooter swap with him. That idea don't taste good to me, though, and it ain't because I'm too honest to do it. I simply don't like to set a fella afoot thataway, because he may be in just as big a hurry as I am and for a better reason. But I've got to get me another horse somehow and I only know two men in all this part of the Red River and Washita Country.

One is Billy Tucker, a Texas boy who married a Chickasaw girl out of a mission school and the finest little woman you ever seen. I made a drive up the trail with Billy when we were kids and many's the night when we stood guard together. He's got him a place somewhere north of here and he's a-raisin' horses and runnin' a dab of cows, but I've made it a point never to go nigh him since he settled down. Billy is better off if folks don't know that he's a friend of Mister Gunman. Anyhow, it's twenty mile or so to his ranch and this bay ain't got twenty miles left in him.

The other fella is Hiram Hiram who used to own a road ranch this side of Abilene, up in Kansas. They say that he got that funny name when he first landed in Kansas City

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from the backwoods of Missouri and got tight and beat up a policeman with his fists. Five or six more policemen came and taken him off to jail. When they went to book him the man asked what his name was and he allowed it was Hiram, then the policeman wanted to know, "Hiram what?" and he said, "Hiram," so he gets booked as Hiram Hiram and the name sticks. I've heard that he sold out in Kansas after somebody broke into his store one night when he was away and strangled his wife. They say that he came down here and married a Chickasaw and opened a trader's store on a cow ranch he bought from another inter-married white man. I done Hi a little favor once—probably kept him from gettin' shot by a drunk he overcharged for a sack of smokin'. He swore that I'd saved his life and he'd be my friend as long as he lived, but somehow or other I never quite believed him. Later on he tried to overcharge *me*. From what I've heard, Hiram's place can't be more'n six-eight mile north of here on this trail and the bay ought to carry me that far if I take it easy. It's my best bet, regardless.

AFTER restin' off and on and takin' cover now and then to dodge travelers on the trail, we make it to Hiram's about three hours before sundown. Old Hi has got him quite a place. Everything built of logs—big store, long bunkhouse, stable, sheds and corrals, and there's a campground at a spring in a grove a short ways north. Several wagons camped down there this evenin' and three horses at the rack when I ride up.

The bay is plumb petered out and so am I, but I can't afford to be tired and slow now because there's no tellin' what I'll run into before I'm able to straddle a good horse and get to hell away from here. Makin' certain that my holsters are a-hangin' right and my six-shooters a-slidin' easy, I mosey into the store. There's three men, just kids, on boxes close to the cracker barrel at the back end and Hiram Hiram is a-settin' on the counter up front with his legs hangin' outside, smokin' a cob. The three strangers are sure surprised to see me—that's plain. Old Hi, he lands on the floor as light as a circus acrobat, notwithstandin' he's one of the biggest men I ever seen and *the strongest*, and comes to meet me with sort of a slidin' walk that carries his six-foot-four and two-hundred-fifty like he didn't weigh hardly nothin' at all. They say he busted the handcuffs when the police tried to hobble him that time in Kansas City.

He puts out a paw big enough to swallow both of mine, and says in his deep soft voice, "Well, if it ain't my old friend, Mistah Gunman! How *are* you, Slim? Never in all my bawn days have I been half as glad to see anybody. Shake!"

I grin. "Howdy, Hi! I'm mighty glad to see you, too, but I recollect how you shake and we'll pass that up, if you don't mind. I'd be in a hell of a mess with a crippled right hand, the way things are."

Hiram Hiram is built perfect, except that his head is too small for his body and his face too big for his head and his eyes too small for his face. He wears his yellow hair shingled close and shaves once a week, I'd say, and he always looks clean as a colt. Reckon he can't get clothes big enough, because they fit him like his hide and you can see muscles rollin' and a-ripplin' underneath them when he moves. What I mean—there ain't no fat under there.

HI AIN'T much older than I am, but he looks so serious now you'd swear he's my lovin' dad. "The way things are?" he repeats. "Now, boy, don't you tell me that you've gone and got yo'self in trouble."

"A-plenty," I say. "Had one horse shot from under me down at Refuge Spring* and another one mighty nigh died in my saddle before I got here this evenin'. Sell me another horse, will you, Hi?"

"Of course, Slim, just anything you want," he answers. Then he goes on in his preacher voice, "Don't be in such a lather, boy. Maybe I can he'p you out. Tell Old Hiram who—"

He stops there. I've got an eye on the three men at the cracker barrel. They hadn't ought to be dangerous. Look like hands just a-startin' out.

So I snap quick, "Blackie Baker is my trouble. Can you do anything about him?"

Hiram's eyebrows, what he's got of 'em, are yellow like his hair. They move up sud-

* So named because it used to be a refuge for outlaws chased north across Red River into The Chickasaw Nation by Texas lawmen A few wounded fugitives died at the spring. At one time there were some outlaw graves under cedars near the spring and they may still be there. It has been years since I saw them. —C. G.

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den. "Baker—mmm—you mean the tinhawn?"

"He passes as a gambler."

"Why, I know Blackie," says Hiram, generous. "Maybe if I tell him that you're one of my best friends, he'll leave you be. What's he got ag'in you, boy?"

"He don't like the way I buck his crooked faro bank."

One of the boys at the cracker barrel speaks up, "Now that you mention it, Mister Gunman, I'll-tell-a-man he doesn't like anything about you. We met a fella on the trail this mornin' and he's spreadin' the word that Baker has put a bounty of five hundred on your hair."

"No!" busts out Hiram with tears in his voice. "*You don't mean it!*"

The boy shrugs. "That's what the man said."

I go back there and put out my hand. "Mister, I'm shore much obliged to you for lettin' me know. You live around here?"

The boy seems to be a right clever fella. "I'm Johnny Clark. That's Bud Harris and this is Cotton Hanks. We been ridin' for Billy Tucker, but he laid us off today. Says he can't afford to carry hands any more, what with the way thieves have stole him down to the bone."

"Billy Tucker?" I ask. "Is he an old Drumm and Draper man?"

Clark answers by tellin' me that Billy knows me, has rode with me, and everything.

Pretty soon Hiram Hiram speaks up in his smooth, soft way, "It's too bad about Billy. He and Jane have worked mighty hard and built 'em up a fine outfit. About a year ago he started losin' stuff and it has been gettin' worse right along. The sheriff and Chickasaw Lighthorse (mounted Indian police) have done their damndest, but they ain't caught nothin' more'n a two-bit cow-thief now and then. I think the world and all of Billy and Jane and I've he'ped 'em what little I can. Been carryin' them for provisions and such. If somethin' ain't done, Billy is shore to lose all he's got left."

NOW, I ain't no philanthropist—as a fella says. When it comes to puttin' out, I'm every bit as selfish as the next man and always aim to get more than I pay for if I can, or at least my money's worth one way or another. There's several ways of doin' that. One way is for your money to get somethin' needed mighty bad by folks you like, and easin' their minds gets you your money's worth, for it makes you feel powerful good. Fact is—that's why you do it, though most folks won't admit it. This Billy Tucker is an old *companero* who rode with me durin' the happiest years of my life and thoughts of him sorta bring back those years, so if Billy needs money and a little help, givin' them to him will make me feel mighty good. Besides, I'm packin' some money that smells so bad it needs to be circulated in the open air.

So I tell Hiram, "Ain't run onto Billy Tucker in a long time. Been layin' off to hunt him up. I owe him so much money I'm almost ashamed to go and see him and pay it back. Make out a bill for what he's got on your books and I'll settle." Knowin' this money-grabbin' skinflint, I add, "Better put down every little thing so that Billy will know exactly how he stands."

Why in hell doesn't Hiram like the idea of gettin' paid? He's a poker-faced cuss and a receivin' devil, but, for a split second he shows how he feels about it. *He don't like it.*

Then down on to my shoulder he slaps the heaviest hand I ever felt. "Slim, you're an angel of mercy. Bread upon the waters. The Good Lawd will reward you tenfold."

"Huh! Next you'll be tellin' me I'm an angel in wolf's clothin.' Make out your bill."

"I'll shore do that," he declares, "but I'm not going' to let you run off in a hurry. You are all ganted up. My crew is away and won't get back for a few days. Plenty room in the bunkhouse. Put up here tonight and we'll see about the horse tomorrow."

That's exactly what I've already decided to do, though I had figured to bunk on the ground over in the camp. Foolish? Yes, plump foolish. I'd oughta get me a horse and keep right on a-movin' to somewheres else. For a long time now, I've made it my business to dodge a fight whenever there's half a chance to do any dodgin' and by stayin' here I'm a-walkin' smack into one. This bounty on my scalp is enough to draw flies. Five hundred ain't tobacco money in any man's country and Blackie Baker will pay, all right. He'd have to, or wake up a-breathin' stale air six foot below grass roots. No foolin'—I'd oughta be makin' dust on the

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goin'-away trail, but I feel so good for a fella that's doin' just what I'd like to do—settle down and build me up a place—I know it'll make me feel damned good to help him out a little if I can.

So I tell Hiram Hiram, "Much obliged, Hi. I'll just take you up on that."

For some reason this makes him mighty happy on the surface, if you can tell anything from his surface. I'm afraid he'll put a fatherly arm around my neck. "Bully, Slim, bully! Will one of you boys take him out and show him water and feed and where to put up his horse, then lead him to an empty stall in the bunkhouse?"

The three hands all say they'll go. As we are about to leave I happen to glance back and there's an Indian woman a-standin' in the door to what must be Hi's livin' quarters. I figure maybe she's his Chickasaw wife. She's short and broad with a round, good-natured face, and—so help me, her eyes are tryin' to tell me somethin', somethin' that ain't pleasant, from the looks of her. I grin and give her the high sign and ask her how she is in Choctaw, which I gabble a little. Her face beams like a copper moon, but that warnin' looks comes back quick—then all of a sudden, she goes wooden. Hiram Hiram has got an eye on her. I walk out of there plumb satisfied that Mister Gunman is a damned fool.

STEPPIN' down to the rack to get my horse, I glance north on the trail and see two riders comin' round a curve not far away. I cuss to myself and wish I was a long ways off. Those fellas are two of the three Baker men that I tangled with down at Refuge Spring. Reckon they got ahead of me on the trail while I was huntin' a horse. Now they're probably headin' back to Gainesville to tell Blackie that they lost me. Well, they done found me again. No sense in hidin' out. They'll stop here, maybe throw off for the night, and they can't help hearin' that I'm in camp or close by. It don't make no difference nohow. As long as I've made up my mind to stop runnin' and stay here and fight if I have to, the sooner the fightin' starts the sooner it'll finish.

I amble back to the store porch, and tell the three hands, "Yander comes trouble. I had words with those scalawags and one more like 'em the other day, and they set me afoot. They're Blackie Baker's men. You boys stay out of this. It ain't your fight."

"Wonder where is the other one," says Cotton Hanks.

"Hard to tell."

I move quick back into the store and stand where I can see the riders through a window. Hiram Hiram wants to know what's up. I tell him.

"Now, Slim, my boy," he says big-hearted, "just you let me handle this. I'll guarantee that when I tell 'em you're one of my best friends, they won't bother you."

"They ain't a-botherin' me much, but go ahead and make your peace talk. I'll tag along."

HIRAM is on the porch when the Baker men ride up to the rack. He calls them by name—Frank Travis and Bob Jacobs, and they answer as if they know him right well. I walk out just before they go to step down. Travis stops with his leg in the air, then slides slow back into his saddle. Jacobs just sets. This Frank Travis—a wiry fella with a keen, dark face—is a fightin' man and I ain't forgot how he behaved down at the spring the other day. I'm keepin' an eye on the salty cuss. Bob Jacobs may be a good horsethief, but he ain't much of a fighter.

"Boys," said Hiram, "you-all know Mistah Gunman. He's one of the best friends I've got in the world. I hadn't seen him in years until he showed up here this evenin' and I'm makin' him stay all night. Light and come in, fellas."

"Don't mind if we do," allows Travis.

He and his pardner look at one another. After that quick glance, he starts to ease himself out of the saddle careless-like and about when his right leg is comin' up to the cantle and his right hand is on the horn, he makes a break for his gun. Now, that's a right good trick if the other fella don't know it. But I do. I've practiced it a plenty, both gettin' on and off.

"Hold 'er!" I snap.

Frank Travis does. This ain't the first time he has looked down the gullet of my six-shooter, and he knows that I won't shoot a man if I can get the drop and halt him by hollerin' at him. Bob Jacobs just sets. Frank looks at him without sayin' a word long enough to count five, then he lights in and

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gives him the damnednest cussin' I ever heard a white man get.

Travis winds up, "You yaller-bellied catfish, we'd a-downed that there double-jointed gunslinger if you'd come along with me!"

Jacobs don't appear to be upset none. He's got a long, solemn face and the end of his nose is red and his eyes watery. "Don't hardly think so, Frank," he says thoughtful. "I recollect that four of us tried it the other day and all we downed was his horse. I don't want five hundred dollars nohow. If I ever had that much all at once I'd drink my fool self to death."

Hiram Hiram seems to be sorta flabbergasted by what happened and his little eyes are powerful mean when Travis steps onto the porch. "Frank," he says soft, "didn't you hear me say that Mistah Gunman is my friend?"

Travis looks right back at Hiram, but I notice that he stays out of range of the big man's hands. "Friend, hell!" he barks. "In this crooked game we're playin', *I deal my cards face up!*"

For a minute, I'm afraid Old Hi will take him by the neck and twist his head off.

Frank turns to me, looks me in the eye. "If I thought I was good enough to meet you gun-to-gun and cut you down I'd do it for the money and glory there'd be in it, but I ain't and I'll never shoot you in the back. I'm tired and want to bunk up here tonight. You don't need to pull out on my account."

I nod careless at him. "Hope you take a bunk next to mine."

Bob Jacobs ambles over. Every time he moves you figure a leg or an arm or somethin' is likely to drop off'n him. He tells me plumb solemn, "Won't go so far as to say *I'll* never shoot you in the back. If I can ever satisfy myself that you ain't got eyes in the back of your head, Mister Gunman, I may try it."

I grin. "Fair enough, Bob. Take all the time you need to make up your mind."

Hiram Hiram's mean look is gone now and he's his old sweet self again. "Slim is my company tonight. He'll be sleepin' in our extra room and the Old Woman has got his name in the pot."

For more'n one reason, sleepin' under the same roof with Hiram Hiram tonight ain't my idea of what I'd ought to do. "Much obliged, Hi. I'll shore be proud to put my feet under your table this evenin' if you'll let me pay for the meal, but I'd better sleep in the bunkhouse. If I can buy a horse from you, I'd like to try him out after dark and there's no tellin' when I'll come home. In my business a man is a fool to ride anything that ain't a good night horse."

"You're dead right, Gunman," says Travis. "You need an owl-eyed horse on the owl-hoot trail."

"Anything you say, Slim," declares Hiram. "Just rope one out of the big corral behind the stable and we won't have no trouble makin' a trade, no trouble at all. Johnny, you boys take him down and show him. Frank and Bob, you-all come in. I want to talk to you."

Old Hi gives me a knowin' look when he tells them that, as much as to say that he aims to lay down the law to these Baker men about me. Personally I figure he wants to get me and the Tucker riders out of the way, which suits me perfect. I've got a little confidential talkin' to do, myownself.

THERE'S fifteen horses in the big corral that ties onto the back of the stable and runs down to the branch, but after the first look I can see only one of them. He's a rangy and high-headed blue horse that shows all the symptoms of brains, speed and bottom. When I dab a loop onto him he's too smart to make a fight and when I walk down the rope a-talkin' to him, he listens polite and sniffs at me to see whether I'm a fit man for a horse like him to work for. He appears to be satisfied and I know that I've done bought me a horse, regardless. Wish I knew his history. None of the boys have ever seen him before and hot iron ain't never touched his hide, so there's no tellin'. Bud Harris swears that I'll have to buy him again from the real owner, or maybe get hung if I'm caught on him.

I look solemn at Bud, and say, "You don't mean to tell me that Hiram would sell anything that didn't belong to him."

Bud grins. So do Cotton and Johnny. Nobody says anything.

Leadin' the blue horse, I head for the fence out away from the stable and everything else where we can talk private. We

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roost on the top pole, and I commence, "Boys, from what you and Hi have said, Billy Tucker is settin' in a crooked game and I aim to buy into it myself. Got some money that needs spendin' and time that's goin' to waste. Here's what I'd like to do first off. Billy needs hands a sight worse now than he does when things are a-runnin' smooth, so I'll advance you two months' wages apiece and you go back to riding for him. Shore, he'll rear and faunch, but you tell him that I ain't forgot how many times he paid my fine when I was busted. And tell him I said to shut his damned mouth. How does that sound to you?"

The boys allow it sounds fine, and Cotton Hanks goes on to say, "We'd a-kept on ridin' for Billy without no wages, but he wouldn't stand for it. Swore he'd run us off with dogs."

Johnny Clark speaks up, "Is Old Hi a genuine friend of your'n?"

"Hell, no!" I answer. "I'll gamble that he ain't a friend to nobody but himself, and he has to watch out or he'll do hisself dirt. Why?"

The three kids look at one another, and Cotton Hanks is elected. "Well, Mister Gunman," he begins, "you see it's like this. We know that Billy thinks a heap of you, so we'll talk straight." He goes on to say that the three of 'em are part Chickasaw, born and raised here in The Nation, spent mighty nigh all of their sixteen-seventeen years a-huntin' and fishin' wherever there's anything to hunt or catch, and that they've seen and heard a-plenty. I don't doubt it. Kids can pick up more scents than an old coon dog on a foggy night. I encourage them to talk, and I listen close.

THEY know that the Blackie Baker bunch has always done more or less stealin' up and down this Red River country, the "thief runs" as they call 'em, usually leadin' to the Fort Towson and Arbuckle Trails which cut antigodlin Southeast to Northwest across Indian Territory, although plenty stolen stuff has moved up the Red almost straight West and along the Washita, then north through the Wichita-Comanche-Cheyenne-Arapaho country and on to Kansas and beyond.

Billy Turner gave them their first jobs two years ago. Up to six months previous he hadn't lost much stuff, but since then he'd lost a-plenty and needed more help. The boys already knew somethin' that Billy didn't know, but they never told him. Ever since Hiram Hiram came to The Nation he had been makin' passes at Billy's pretty wife, Jane, but of course, she didn't let on to her husband. It wouldn't've meant a killin' if she had. There finally came a time when she had to bust Old Hi over the head with a new pick handle that she'd just bought off'n him at the store Soon afterward, thieves went to work on Billy Tucker in earnest.

Cotton winds up, "Now, you go ahead and ask questions. Maybe we can answer some of 'em."

I'm a-thinkin', wonderin' where in hell to start on this little job of work I've let myself in for. This is all open range. The Chickasaws own the land in common and every citizen of The Nation is entitled to use what he needs, but he ain't allowed to fence in big pastures so that when he wants to hold his stock on any particular range he does it with line riders same as they do on open ranges everywhere. Of course, Billy Tucker is a citizen. So is Hiram Hiram. When a white man marries a Chickasaw woman he's often adopted into the tribe and given citizenship rights same as if he was a full-blood. Naturally, Indian law officers have helped Billy all they could. If *they* haven't been able to run onto the big thieves, I'm dead certain that I can't. Wonder whether I couldn't sorta set myself out as bait and make the thieves run onto *me?* Maybe the idea ain't worth a damn, but it's the only one I've got.

First thing I learn from the boys is where Hiram's crew is likely to be tonight, since he has said they won't be comin' home. Afterwards, we hunker down in the corral and they draw maps and I ask questions until I'd ought to be able to make my way around the country with one eye shut, and they read off the biggest brands in The Nation so's I'll know them when I see 'em.

After a while, I go into my money-belt and come up with two months' wages apiece. Knowin' a little bit about kids, I tell them, "Now, fellas, I'd shore like to have you help me get Billy out of the mess he's in. You can do it by high-tailin' back to his Lazy J and tellin' him what I've done, then

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go to ridin' a mighty close herd on his stuff. Can't say what I'll be doin'; because I don't know myself, but I will be raisin' plenty hell and somebody may try to clean Billy complete on account of it. One of you come back here tomorrow before noon and if I ain't here, wait a while. I may have somethin' to tell you. Meantime, don't you sleep no moren't you have to and make certain that you've got plenty cartridges. How does that strike you, fellas?"

They're all fired up, can't hardly wait to get back to the store and fork their broncs. Old Hi looks at me sorta suspicious when the boys ride off in such a lather, but ten seconds later butter won't melt in his mouth.

He behaves thataway all through supper. Frank Travis and Bob Jacobs eat with us and he treats them like he treats me, bein' particularly friendly to Frank, and from the way he carries on you'd swear we were his wanderin' boys home for the first time in years. His wife waits table and don't say nothin' to nobody, don't hardly look at nobody but Hiram.

After supper we all go down to the stable with a lantern. Old Hi and I dicker until we've made a swap and I own the blue horse, with the understandin' that I ride him all I'm a-mind to between now and mornin' and if his night eyes don't suit me I get my money back. Hiram goes into the bunkhouse and writes me out a bill of sale and I wonder whether its worth the paper he used. All I've been able to learn about the horse—Hi declares he bought him off'n a mover who was powerful hard up for cash and he ain't seen the man since. He shows me a bill of sale from somebody. Frank Travis and Bob Jacobs listen close, but don't say nothin'.

THE blue horse behaves like a gentleman when I'm a-cinchin' up, and when I ease myself into the saddle and get set for trouble he's still a gentleman. He'd better be. I used to think it was fun to thaw out a cold pony, but that was before I hit the long trail. When I climb aboard nowadays, it may be plumb fatal if my horse wants to go up and down in the same place while I need to be goin' away fast.

Before the full moon comes up I know that Old Blue is an owl-eyes horse, and when we get some light and I line him out on the trail to Wilson's Prairie I know that he's all horse. The boys said I'd probably find Hiram's crew camped at Wilson's Spring. He built him some pens there and throwed up a shed and cabin for his hands and their horses in bad weather, and Cotton Hanks swore that many a brand had been worked over in those pens at night when honest folks were asleep or out 'coon huntin'. That's what Cotton and another kid were doin' when he saw some brand burners at work down there. East a short piece and right handy to the prairie there's some powerful rough and wooded country where small batches of stock can be hidden until a buzzard couldn't find them, a good place to hold stolen stuff before it's shoved north to one of the main trails or drifted west.

Now, I ain't a-huntin' stolen stock tonight. As I said a while back, if the Chicakasaw officers can't catch the thieves in the act or find the stuff, I know damned well I can't unless I happen to do it accidental. I'm simply out to get mean, throw a bluff, make the most of my reputation for bein' a bad man to monkey with in the hopes that the thieves will call me and show their hands. Carryin' on the way I aim to do and don't like to do, a fella sooner or later gets called a-plenty.

The old moon sure is my friend tonight. When I ride down to Wilson's Spring it's almost light enough to read brands on the horses in the corral and if the two men settin' in the smoke of a mosquito smudge out in front of the cabin would take off their hats I could read their brands, too.

When I rein in, they speak and I grunt, "Howdy."

One of them tosses his cigarette into the smoke, and mutters to his pardner, "Gunman."

They don't ask me to light, but I do it anyhow. Amblin' over there, I say cold and unfriendly, "Before the law taken out after me, Billy Tucker was a friend of mine. I stopped at Hiram's this evenin'. A fella told me that thieves are puttin' Billy out of business. I'm a-huntin' Lazy J stock and the thieves that stole it. D'you want to come along while I take a look at the horses you've got penned out yander?"

They don't make a move or say nothin' right off. The fella that throwed his smoke

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away goes to buildin' him another. Pretty soon, he says, "All depends, Gunman, all depends."

"Depends on what?" I snap.

"On what you'll do if we don't go with you."

"I'll go alone."

"Uh-huh," he drawls, "and if you find some lazy J's, I reckon you'll sic the law onto us."

"Like hell I will! You comin'?"

He shakes his head, and the fool is a-grinnin' like a dadblamed 'possum. "Just wanted to hear you talk, Mister Gunman. Go and help yourself. Me—I ain't gettin' paid to tangle with the likes of you."

Wish I didn't have to be so infernally mean to this cuss. I could get along with him. "Well, you heard me talk, stranger."

As I pick up my reins, he says, "Shore hope you don't find enough to hang us."

"I ain't out to get nobody hung, mister, but I aim to make somebody wish he'd never seen a Lazy J horse."

I've done all I come here to do, but I'll have to make a show of lookin' the horses over. There's twenty in the corral. I get them strung out and movin' around the fence and although it takes a little time in moonlight, I read every brand. No Lazy J's—nary a one.

Back at the cabin, I ask the friendly fella, "Seen a brand out there that I can't name. Looks like an egg squeezed down to a point at one end and about to fall on its face. I'd call it the Lazy Egg. What is it and who owns it?"

"That's the Teardrop. Hiram owns it. Don't hurry off, Mister Gunman."

"Got places to go," I say gruff. "If you meet up with anybody, tell 'em I'm a-huntin' Lazy J stock.

RIDING away slow, I'm a-thinkin' some about that Teardrop brand. Take a Lazy J and one short burn with a runnin' iron turns it into a Teardrop. I can't believe that Chickasaw officers haven't figured out that simple thing, and where are Billy Tucker's eyes. They must have seen that brand. Or have they? The kids said that nobody grazed the rough country below here—feed poor and too easy to lose stock, and Billy's range is away off in the other direction from his headquarters. Suppose these Teardrops are held down here from the time they're branded until ready to be moved, then brought out at night and drove hard until daylight? By that time they're clean out of the Chickasaw Nation and into a country where the Teardrop may be registered and known as a perfectly innocent brand. Could be. But, I ain't a brand inspector or stock detective. Too much work for the brain I've got. The easiest way for me to find these here thieves is to make them come to me. When they hear that I'm suspicious of the Teardrop, if my suspicions are any good, they may come a-smokin' and I may be sorry they did.

It's a nice night and, dog-tired as I am, I'm a mind to do a little more ridin' on my new horse. We swing onto an animal trail that points toward the bad-lands and Old Blue jogs along like he knows exactly where we're goin'. It ain't far to where the brakes commence. What I mean—this is sure enough rugged country, scrubby timber, deep and sharp draws and some of them show signs of water, but not much grass in sight. After we've gone a ways we climb to the top of a knob that's clear of shadows and I rein in to listen and look around. The only things I hear are the night sounds I've been hearin' all my life. The air—you could hardly call it a breeze—is movin' up canyon and all of a sudden it brings me somethin'. I've got a long nose and it has been trained to work for me. Livin' the way I live, a man learns to use all his five senses or he don't live long. I smell a brandin' pen—burnin' wood, hair and flesh! There ain't no other smell like it. Now, where in hell is it?

Naturally, they're careful not to put up a smoke. They ain't doin' any loud talkin' or we'd hear them. I'm watchin' Old Blue's ears and he ain't particularly interested in anything out yander. It ain't rained lately and I've never seen a brandin' pen without its dust in dry weather. Where is this dust? I get down and set down so as to skylight the rims of some of these draws a little better. The air is clear as air ever is, not a particle of haze. Lookin' slow and careful as far as I can see in the moonlight, pretty soon my eyes stop at a place where the old moon hits somethin' in the air when he shoots his beams at the earth. Dust! Do as much night ridin' as I have and you won't miss dust in the moonlight, particularly

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when you're lookin' for it. It's kinda white, like fog at first glance, then you notice that it's not behavin' like a fog. Anyhow, there's dust floatin' out of a draw down yander not very far away.

We set off again at a walk. It ain't long before Old Blue picks up sounds that I can't hear and his perky little ears show that he's tryin' to figure what it is. The brandin' pen smell is gettin' stronger. He snorts soft, like he didn't want to make too much noise. Pretty soon I catch a sound I know—a little squeal, then a horse or cow slammin' into corral bars. Shortly after that, low voices! We go on slow until we reach the mouth of the draw. It's fairly heavy timbered with a talkin' and it seems like there's only two alongside of it. Listenin' hard, I hear men talking' and it seems like there's only two of them havin' anything to say.

I tell Old Blue, "Here we go, fella. Shore hope gunfire don't spook you."

We walk slow up the cowpath until it ain't safe to ride no farther, then I get down and tie Blue and hoof it. In no time at all I'm behind a big tree where I can see the whole outfit. There's two pens connected by a gate, one twice the size of the other. In the big pen there's a band of maybe ten horses. The gate is open and three fellas are cuttin' a single horse into the little corral. Then I watch a mighty pretty job of ropin'. That horse gets forefooted and tied down with a man a-settin' on his head in record time. No fuss about it, either. Out comes a runnin' iron from a little fire, a fella who is bossin' things takes it and the job is done quick, like that. The smell of hair and flesh is strong, and so is the smell of trouble. I know that cuss. He's a brand artist, a top thief, a fightin' fool, and his name is Slide Simpson.

They kick the horse back into the big corral and shove another into the brandin' pen. While that is goin' on, I slip from my tree to a clump of dogwood growin' against the small corral and watch them doctor the second horse. Meantime, I see somethin' else. The third fella in there, who don't talk none, is a full-blood and he's packin' a badge! That's a hell of a note. He'll fight, for he knows that if the Chickasaw authorities get onto him they'll try him and sentence him to death in a hurry.

Too bad, I think, *but an Indian officer has got as much right to be crooked as if he was white.*

I've got to catch them by surprise—plumb flat-footed—and if I don't I'm walkin' into a situation that may call for more than I've got. I wait until they're puttin' the doctored horse into the big corral and all have their backs turned, then I slip from the dogwood between the poles and into the brandin' pen unnoticed.

"Stick 'em up!" I bark.

One man does, instanter. Slide Simpson and the Indian whirl and crouch like surprised wildcats, and their guns are a-spittin' fire and lead. I expected this. I'm ready for them, got the jump on 'em, stopped far enough away so it's easy for them to miss. They go to shootin' before they hardly know what to shoot at. Me—I don't waste no lead. They both go down. Simpson is knocked out. The Indian drops his gun, gropes for it, picks it up.

"Stop it!" I snap.

His bullet jerks the wing of my leggin's. Then I let him have it. He drops his gun again. He won't need it no more. If I know Indians, when he committed suicide by firin' that last shot, in his mind's eye he was facin' his tribe and disgrace in a Chickasaw courtroom with the word, "Guilty!" a-poundin' in his ears.

I tell the other man, "Throw your gunbelt over the fence!"

He unbuckles and throws it, and looks close at me as I walk toward him. "Say! Ain't you the fella they call Mister Gunman?"

"Some folks call me that."

"Godamighty! Glad I had sense enough not to make a fight."

"So am I, stranger," I drawl. "I ain't no hog. Now, let's take a look at Simpson. I mighty nigh missed him. Don't think he's hurt bad."

My bullet peeled Slide's scalp over his right ear and furrowed his skull a-plenty, but it hadn't ought to kill him if he's taken care of. I settle back on my heels and look at my prisoner. He ain't no different from any young cowhand. Right clean appearin' scalawag. Betcha he ain't never done time in a pen. Got in with the wrong bunch, which is mighty easy for a boy to do when he's just a-startin' out.

"Calc'late Simpson will pull through if

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you get him to a doctor right away," I tell the kid. "Know where to find one?"

"Shore! Straight down the trail through these bad-lands seven-eight mile to their far side. Old Doc Woodman, and he's—"

"All right, we'll tie him on his horse and you can take him to the doc." I look steady at the boy for a minute. "And if you want my advice, mister, you keep on a-ridin' until you're clean away from this bunch of thieves. "You're workin' for Hiram Hiram, ain't you?"

"Y-yes, and my name is—"

"Keep it to yourself, fella, until you can put it on the payroll of an honest outfit."

"I'll do that, Mister Gunman, and I'm shore much obliged to you."

I grin. "Forget it. Jest tell me how to get these horses away from here and back to Lazy J headquarters without goin' nigh that camp at Wilson's Spring. They're all Lazy J's, ain't they?"

The kid says there are and he shows me on the ground how to get to where I want to go. "If it wasn't for Slide," he adds, "I'd help you with 'em."

"No, you wouldn't! You've got some ridin, to do, mister. When he finds out about these here Teardrops, Billy Tucker will sic the law onto somebody. You get to hell away from here and go to a healthier climate. Don't forget your gun-belt, kid."

Watchin' the boy ride away, I'm askin' myself the question, *Why didn't I make him tell me all he knows about these thieves?*

The answer is easy, *I ain't got no use for a squealer, so I won't make a squealer out of any man.*

WHEN I've trailed them out of the bad-lands, these Lazy J horses know the way home and they burn the breeze. Old Blue is on their tails every foot of the way. Comin' in sight of what the kid said would be Billy Tucker's headquarters, I drop the horses and we head back to Hiram Hiram's.

It must be all of three o'clock in the mornin' when I step off at the stable. The only light in sight is down at the camp-ground where some mover is fixin' to get an early start and his wife is workin' around a little fire by the light of a lantern hung on the side of the wagon. By now the old moon has slanted off toward the west so that he can look into the stable door. I aim to put Blue in a stall and rub him down and cool him off before waterin' him out, then I'll bring him back and give him a good feed, but he ain't no more'n got his head inside the door before he snorts and pulls back. I step out of the light quick, and jerk a six-shooter, then look around to see what the hell. Over there in an empty stall not far from the door, lays a man. He's dead! No live man ever slept with his head twisted out of shape thataway.

It's Frank Travis!

I put Blue in a stall. Afterward, I go and strike matches careful and look the dead outlaw over good. There's marks on his throat and jaw, but the skin ain't broke. Could be finger marks. His holster is empty, but his six-shooter is half buried in straw on the floor nearby. Then I notice Frank's right arm. It's splintered and twisted. There are marks on his wrist, too. Could be finger marks. It ain't too warm, but I swear—sweat is runnin' down into my boots.

Bob Jacobs is the only man a-sleepin' in the bunkhouse. I wake him up easy and tell him about his pardner, then ask, "What-all hell happened while I was gone?"

"We was tired," he answers. "Hit the hay soon after you left. I was asleep before I got my boots off, you might say. Along in the night Frank drops somethin' and wakes me up. He allows he heard a racket in the stable and is goin' to see—wants to make sure that his snorty bronc ain't down in its stall, or somethin'. I'm dead asleep again before he hardly gets out of the door. That's all. Why didn't I go with pore Old Frank!"

"Maybe it's just as well," I say quiet. "Don't answer my questions if you ain't a mind to, Bob, but remember that I don't never have no truck with the law. I could see that there was bad blood between Frank and Hiram. What caused it?"

Bob Jacobs is a-setting up now, rollin' a cigarette in moonlight from a window over his bunk. His fingers are shaky and I don't blame him none. That might've been him a-layin' down yander in the stable, all twisted out of shape.

The outlaw ain't slow about talkin'. "Well, you see it's like this. Hiram Hiram used to work with us—with Blackie Baker, that is, and he was right easy to get along with. After a while he outgrows hisself, gets to thinkin' he's good and don't need us

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no more. He tells Blackie to stay to hell out of this part of the country. Whenever he runs onto one of our men he gives orders like he's the boss, and he gets plumb ringy if we don't mind him—like today when he declared that you're a friend of his'n, and he's burnt up at Frank for makin a pass at you. Old Hiram swears he's the big bull catfish of all this Washita country and the balance of us long riders have got to kow-tow to him. You better take good care of yourself, Mister Gunman."

"Much obliged, Bob," I say. "Aim to do the best I can, anyhow. What does Blackie Baker think about Old Hiram tryin' to horn in and take over?"

"He thinks a-plenty, Blackie does," declares Bob, blowin' smoke at a moth that dives at his cigarette coal. "Up to now he ain't done nothin' much but think, though. Now he aims to do somethin' about it. Blackie oughta be here sometime today. Didn't I hear you say that you figure to be long gone by noon?"

"Hard to tell what-all I said," I drawl, "but thanks for the idea, Bob. Like Blackie Baker—it strikes me that I've done too much thinkin' and not enough doin'. You aim to wait here for him?"

"Yes, I'll wait, but—" He turns his head slow and looks off in the direction of the stable. "But, Godamighty, Gunman! I won't sleep another wink while I'm here!"

"Glad to hear you say that," I tell him, "because soon as I put up my horses, I've simply got to catch me forty winks if I can. Maybe I'll be able to do it if you're awake. Comin' back I'll catch Frank and we'll put him in his bunk."

Bob looks at me sorta curious. "You ain't forgettin' that I'm a Baker man and and you're Mister Gunman?"

"No, Bob, and I ain't forgettin' that you're a *man.*"

I GET a little sleep all right. Bob and I don't say anything until after breakfast, then we take Hiram out to the bunkhouse and show him Frank Travis. You never seen a grown man go to pieces like he does. He's shaky and jumpy all over and his little eyes won't stand still and his big blunt fingers keep a-workin' at his chin like was a man goin' crazy a-tryin' to figure what he ought to do.

"Just let me set down, boys," he says hoarse. "I—I've got to tell you somethin'."

Hiram hunts for his cob, finds it in his pocket where he always carries it and fires it up—breaks three matches before he gets one to light, then he goes on, "Boys, Lige Cole is here—right here in The Nation. I've been expectin' him. Now, he's here and he come to kill me. *To strangle me!*"

"Who is Lige Cole?" I ask. "Never heard of him."

"Of course," he says. "I forget that you-all ain't never heard tell of Lige." He sets and stares at the blanket that's got Frank Travis under it, and he puffs fast and nervous until smoke is so thick in his face his eyes water, and after a long time he goes to talkin' again. "Lige Cole and I growed up together back in Missoury. He growed to be bigger and stronger than me. We was like brothers, hunted, fished, trapped and mighty nigh lived together. Then we got to courtin' the same girl. She come between us. One day when we was away off from the settlement in the woods, we had a fuss. I ain't never been as mad, befo' or since, as I was that day in the woods. We fit. Lige was a stouter man than me, but I—reckon it was because I got so mad. We fit, and—*I strangled Lige!*"

Hiram Hiram sets hunched over a chair like a big, brown bear, and he smokes nervous thataway for a long time. I'm gettin' nervous, too, waitin' for him to go on.

After a while, he does, "I run away and left Lige a-layin' there awayoff in the woods like that. Come to Kansas. Got married. As fine a woman as a man ever had. One night I come home and found Jennie—*Somebody strangled—Jennie!* Then I knew that Lige wa'n't dead that time I left him in the woods. He's a-follerin' me. He come a-huntin' me, found Jennie and strangled her. I run off from Kansas Come away down here. It's taken Lige a long time to find me again but now he—Frank run onto Lige in the stable last night. Lige strangled Frank—broke his bones and strangled Frank like—like he aims to *strangle me!*"

Damned if I ain't a-sweatin' again. Bob Jacobs mops his face, too. Hiram Hiram stands up sudden. God, he's big! His eyes dart back and forth between us and they look wild a muskhog's when it's cornered. He jabs the air at us with his pipestem. "My crew will be gone a week. You stay

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here, Bob and Slim, you stay here with me. I'll pay you wages, *fightin' wages.*"

Bob looks at the blanket, looks long and hard, and he shakes his head hard. "Not me, Hi! I'll leave out from here before dark today!"

Hiram fixes his eyes on me through the smoke. I tell him, "I'll bunk here tonight, maybe tomorrow night."

"Much obliged, Slim! You're my friend and you know that I'm your friend, don't you, Slim?"

"Friendship ain't keepin' me here."

Bob Jacobs stares at me as if he figures I'm crazy. You can't read a damn' thing in Hiram Hiram's big face when he looks at you dumb like that. He allows he's got to go and send word about the killin' to a deputy sheriff who lives in the neighborhood.

I get up and stretch. "Reckon I'll mosey down to the barn and curry my new horse. Some horse."

"Uh-huh, some horse," drawls Jacobs. "That's what Blackie Baker used to say about him."

"Huh?"

"Yep, and Blackie shore hated to lose that blue horse."

"Lose him?"

"Uh-huh, he was lifted off'n Blackie one night last month when we was camped up the Washita, northwest of here."

"Where did Baker get that horse?"

Bob sorta pulls at one ear. "Wel-l, a fella *never* knows where Blackie got a certain horse, and if he *does* know he's a damned fool to say so."

"Much obliged, Bob. Sorry I asked you that last question."

I walk away from the bunkhouse thinkin' that it'll take a better man than Blackie Baker to get Old Blue away from me, unless he can prove ownership. And I'm thinkin' about Hiram Hiram, too. It's a 100-to-1 bet that I hadn't any more'n left Wilson's Spring last night before one of those men lit out for here and told Hi that I'd been there. But Hiram didn't let on this mornin' —nice as pie at breakfast. He may or may not know what happened at the brandin' pen. Chances are he doesn't. I figure the kid lit out and Slide Simpson won't do any ridin' for a day or so at least.

Cotton Hanks shows up before nine o'clock. I take him out to the corral fence again and go over everything that happened last night. Sure enough—he's never seen or heard of the Teardrop brand. I tell the Lazy J boy to get a-hold of Billy's wife and have her keep Tucker away from here today and tomorrow, because there's likely to be trouble at Hiram's and Billy would certainly get tangled in it if he was anywhere around.

"I'll shore do that, Mister Gunman," says the kid. "The boss made a devil of a fight about us goin' back to work and you payin' our wages, likewise settlin' his bill at Hiram's, but he finally calmed down. He told me to tell you to come to the Lazy J right away. He wants to see you bad. He aims to cut you down about twelve inches with an axe, startin' at your top end, then he'll beat the hell out of you. That's what Billy said."

After the boy leaves, I go to the store to buy a sack of tobacco. Hiram seen me take Cotton down to the corral and with what he already knows, you'd figure he'd treat me like a mad dog, but he don't. He treats me like a kid brother who is the apple of his eye. What I mean—it ain't human for a man to be so infernally two-faced, but that's Hiram Hiram—human, or whatever he is.

On the way down to the stable I see his wife drawin' water and carryin' it to the pigpen, so I amble over to the well to get me a fresh drink. When she comes back from the pen, we pass the time of day and I draw the next bucket for her. She keeps an eye on the back windows in the store scared-like.

I grin, and ask her in Choctaw which ain't much different from Chickasaw, "What are you afraid of, my friend?"

She bends over the bucket a-talkin' soft and fast. "Yesterday, man came and told Hiram that Baker would pay five hundred dollars for your scalp. My husband loves money. Last night our man came and told him that you were at Wilson's Spring. My husband is terrible when angry. I am afraid for you, my friend."

"Why do you tell me this thing?"

She calls me by the name the Osages gave me when I lived with them, "I tell you because The Owl is known to be friend to my people. I must go now."

Walkin' away, I'm a-thinkin', *An Indian woman will take plenty abuse from her hus-*

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band, but that don't stop her from hatin' him.

AN hour or so after dinner Bob Jacobs and I are down at the corral a-talkin' horse. All of a sudden Hiram Hiram shows up at the corner of the stable ten feet away and neither of us had heard him comin', he moves so devilish quiet. He says the deputy ain't at home, so we'll go ahead and bury the dead man and he'll notify the law the first chance he gets. Hiram asks Bob if Frank had any folks.

"Not that I know of," answers Jacobs. "Never heard him say anything about folks."

"To bad," says Hiram soft. "Pore boy! Buried by strangers in a strange land. May the Good Lord rest his soul in peace."

Then we go and bury Frank Travis with his blanket for a coffin.

Hiram Hiram hangs around the corral with us, says his wife will watch the store. I've turned Old Blue in with the other horses and we hook our elbows on the top pole, lookin' the nags over and talkin' about their good and bad points and such, arguin' friendly and sociable. I see two riders stop at the rack at the south side of the store, but Bob and Hiram don't notice them. From the side of my eye I watch the newcomers get down and—Godamighty! That's Blackie Baker and Blaine Nevis! This Nevis works as lookout when Baker is dealin' faro, and he thinks he's a gunslinger. I keep still. Pretty soon they come out of the store, glance down here, then mount and walk their horses this way.

Bob Jacobs rips out an oath. "He's got that damned killer with him! Gunman, why don't you make you're getaway. Go through the corral into the back door of the stable. Take my horse."

I grin, shake my head. "First chance we get, Bob, I'll buy."

Hiram Hiram moves out away from the fence, ahead of us. He looks back at me, and talks fast, "No matter what happens, you let me handle this, Slim. Recollect, *I'm your friend.*"

I nod, hook my thumbs in my belt and don't say nothin'.

Baker and Nevis speak. So do we. They step down a good twenty feet away, drop reins, settle their belts on their hips, and come on careless-like. Blackie is a swarthy little cuss—won't heft more'n a hundred thirty, and when he moves you think of a spider—infernally quick, poison, but he's brittle and kills easy. Nevis had the look of a bully bartender, black mustache and all.

Standin' six feet ahead and a little to one side of us, Hiram puts out his paw. Baker goes to shake, then points with his other hand.

"Where did you get that blue horse?" he asks sharp.

I answer quick, "You mean *my* horse? Bought him. Why?"

Blackie Baker qualifies as plumb sudden on the draw. But he looks slow to me now. Whoever said that a grizzly's paw is the fastest livin' thing never seen Hiram Hiram's hands. Wish I'd never seen them. It will be many a day before I forget the sounds of one man killin' another with his naked hands. It ain't no fit way for a man to die.

Meantime, I ain't asleep. "Nevis!" I bark. "That's right! Keep 'em there!"

A short while later Bob Jacobs and Blaine Nevis head south on the trail to Red River. They're a-leading Blackie Baker's horse and Blackie is tied face down across his saddle. Bob recollected hearin' Blackie say that when it come his time to get planted, he kinda hoped he'd go under the ground at Refuge Spring, so they'll bury Blackie there.

While we watch the boys ride off, Hiram Hiram puts a hand on my shoulder. Underneath it my skin crawls. Now comes his preacher voice, "It's the Lawd's will. We're instruments of the Lawd. 'He who lives by the sword—' Besides, I was mighty glad to do that for you. I'm your friend, Slim."

We walk thoughtful back to the store and get there just in time to see his Indian wife drop a paper sack of beans. It busts and they scatter on the floor. Two of his panther steps take Hiram over there. He puts a hand on her shoulder gentle-like. She bites her lip and her eyes go misty and she freezes where she stands, but that woman don't cry out. Then I look at his stubby fingers. They're bitin' deep! Now I know how come those bruises I've noticed on her naked arms.

This is too much for me. "Hiram, strikes me that you're gettin' sorta rough with the lady."

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He drops his hand quick. His voice is deep and soft and chock full of repentance. "Why, of course! Sorry, Mamie. I'm all upsot. Didn't think, and I'm plumb ashamed of myself."

Wish to hell he carried a gun!

At supper this evenin' I drink four cups of strong coffee. I'm short on sleep, but maybe the coffee will keep me awake. If it doesn't, I sure won't forget the look in the Chickasaw women's eyes when she's behind her husband and that's enough to keep anybody awake. Never seen anything like the way she handles a butcher knife. While she's carvin' a big fat wild turkey for us, I can't keep my eyes off'n that shiny twelve-inch blade. It sure is sharp and expert.

Hiram Hiram is his smooth and fatherly self again. He carries on about how thankful he is to have me stay here tonight on account of Lige Cole, notwithstandin' I keep tellin' him that I'm stayin' so as to hunt Lazy J stock tomorrow. He don't expect his crew home until the day after.

He finally persuades me to sleep at the store tonight in a room adjoinin' theirs, and he swears he'll rest better if I *take my six-shooters to bed with me.* Maybe he knows I'll do it anyhow. I've worn them at his table which I'd never do if I trusted him.

After supper we stay in the kitchen and play pitch. You'd think his big fingers would be awkward with cards, but he shuffles and deals like he talks and walks—plumb smooth and easy, and the muscles in his hands and forearms are fit to admire if you didn't know what they could do to you. Hiram's wife sits in a chair and rocks. Her sister has got a baby on the way and she's beadin' the smallest pair of moccasins you ever seen to give to the little fella. She just rocks and rocks and don't look up, or say nothin' at all. The squeak of her chair sorta rasps on me. I'm smoking one cigarette after another and wishing they wouldn't burn up so fast.

Once, Hiram Hiram looks across the table at me thoughtful, and says soft, "You hadn't oughta smoke so much, Slim. Makes you nervous."

"Keeps me awake, I hope."

I drink more coffee and stay up as long as I can, but I'm devilish tired—ridin' and fightin' and hidin' out for four days straight with only a few hours' sleep. I'd give anything to roll up in my blankets on the prairie some place, twenty miles from Hiram Hiram. Where in hell did I get this idea of settin' myself up as bait? After a while I tell him I've simply got to hit the hay.

When I say "Goodnight" to the Indian woman, she looks up at me with a right pleasant little smile. Her voice is low and good to listen to, "That bed is a good bed, my friend. The Owl will sleep more safely here than does his feathered brother.

This room ain't hardly big enough to turn around in. Makes a fella feel like he couldn't draw a full breath, like he'd maybe smother. But this *is* a good bed, with my six-shooters on the soft tick alongside of me and a thin blanket over me to hide them—good bed, all right, mighty nigh long enough for me—good for a tired man to stretch out on—good bed, but I won't—well— hadn't oughta—go to sleep.

Maybe I *didn't* sleep. Anyhow, I'm awake when it happens, for down on the spring branch a bullfrog is a-rumbling deep, and out in the woods an old barred owl is a-boomin' big, and a mockin'bird is a singin' fit to tear his throat out, and down in the campground a baby is cryin' so hard it strangles itself—Strangles—! Now, *I know I'm awake!*

That ain't Lige Cole a-sliding silent past the foot of my bed in light from my window. That's Hiram Hiram! Naked to the waist. God, he's big! He don't make any noise, but boards groan under his weight. Smart—told me to take my six-shooters to bed with me because he could see that I was dead for sleep and couldn't possibly stay awake in a good bed. What he can't see—under the blanket, my right-hand gun ready to blow him to hell. But I'll wait, wait as long as I dast. I've never shot an unarmed man.

So help me—there's the Indian woman in my door! She moves quick like a ghost behind Hiram. I snore and groan to catch his attention and hide any noise she makes. Moonlight flashes on the twelve-inch blade of that butcher knife. It darts into view over his shoulder, brushes first one side of his big neck, then the other. This Chicksaw woman is strong. She's expert with a knife.

I won't have to shoot an unarmed man.

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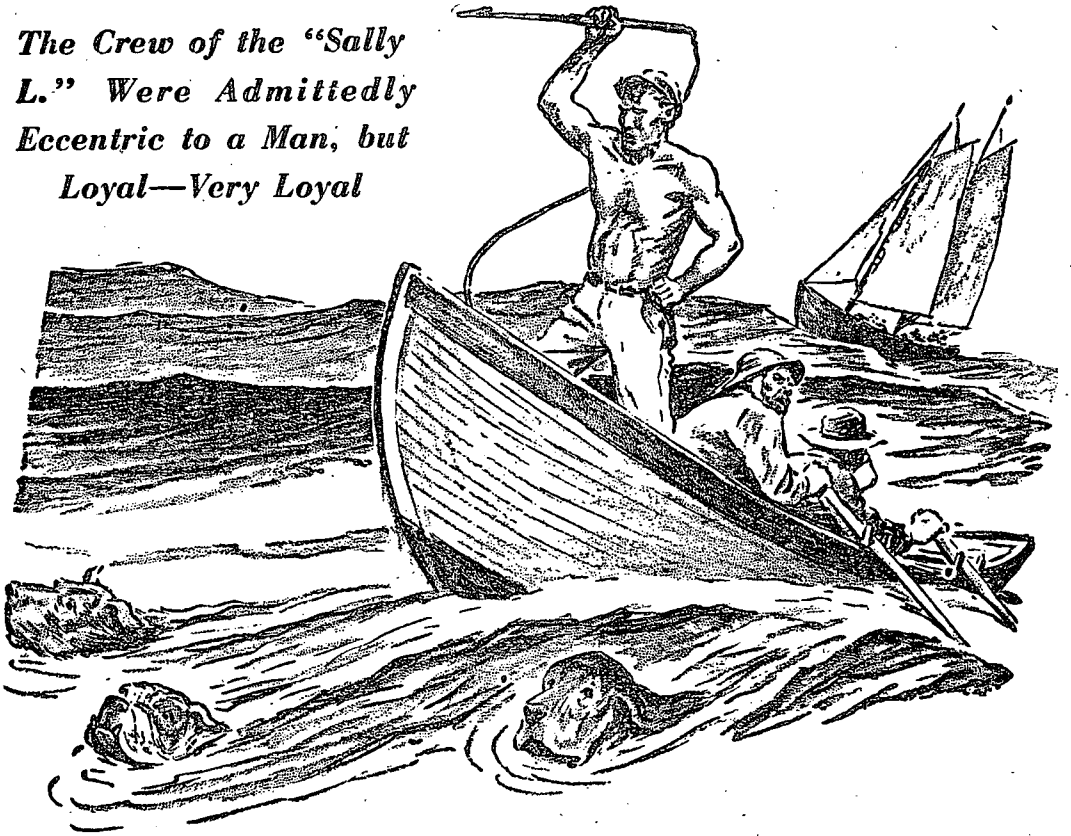
The Crew of the "Sally L." Were Admittedly Eccentric to a Man, but Loyal—Very Loyal



HOMER AND THE WHALE

By FRANCIS GOTT

LIFE on the Banks can be lonely if a man makes it so. However, Captain Barnabas Lee always unknotted the strings of a fresh dawn to find the package of the day interesting within. After all, he had a fine crew—eccentric, very eccentric, but loyal to a man. Then, too, there were Homer Sims' three dogs, ugly yet affectionate brutes that helped to keep life aboard the *Sally L.* from going stale.

Still, Captain Barnabas had his worries which were ever his wont to keep concealed. His crew were like children in some respects, simple and kindly and hard-working men even though they were, and as long as they had a dollar or two for tobacco, shaving soap and an occasional snort of rum they were happy. In truth, some of them didn't even shave; they merely clipped their whiskers as close to the face as possible and let it go at that.

Today, however, even though Captain Barnabas' shoulders were unbowed they carried a full cargo of worries. Oboe Vreeley, the old fool, had walked off the end of a Newfie wharf, breaking his brittle leg on the rocks beneath. If he'd only waited for high tide before falling; but he hadn't, and Captain Barnabas had had to mortgage his schooner to get the old man out of the hospital.

Captain Barnabas ate his breakfast in stolid silence, the specter of his mounting debts before him. Grub was so high in these modern days; bacon and ham and butter a dollar a pound and eggs a dollar a dozen. Whether the fishing were good or

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bad, there was no getting around the disturbing fact that it cost a lot to feed seven hearty men and three hearty dogs.

Captain Barnabas sighed. "Tune that radio down a bit, Homer. It's got so a body can't think aboard this vessel."

Sometimes Captain Barnabas rued the day when he had given the radio to Homer Sims. Those broadcasts were like black magic; they all too often cast a spell upon Sims' vivid imagination.

Sims' big body, of hard bone and sinew, was sprawled out in his bunk. His craggy head was almost glued to the radio. What Sims found of interest in the report of the Boston Genetic Society was more than Captain Barnabas could fathom. Right now, a voice as dry as weathered spar varnish was droning about the possible effects of atomic ray penetration on the genes of white whales. Captain Barnabas snorted.

"Even now," the voice went on, "our Professor C. J. Rathbone, having secured passage aboard a ninety-foot dragger, is searching the Grand and Georges Banks for a white whale reputedly seen there. The Society is prepared to pay the sum of ten thousand dollars for a specimen in good condition, suitable for mounting in the Peabody Museum of the Whaling Industry—""

Captain Barnabas pricked his grizzled ears. Ten thousand dollars! Then he sank back again on the bench locker as judgment got the upper hand over wishful thinking. The *Sally L.* was a good trawler, but she was no whaler. Besides, they didn't even have a harpoon aboard.

He shook his head and climbed topside, bracing his stocky body to the gentle rolling of the vessel. It was a pretty morning, the sun of early July turning the fog to a curtain of golden lace.

Suddenly, from aft, came the clamor of Sims' great dogs. Then, with an unexpectedness that quite took both his breath and his dignity away, the dogs raced forward, whisking between Captain Barnabas' legs and capsizing him. To his amazement, the Airedale first, the hound second and the bulldog last, he watched them jump overboard.

"Scrape my timbers!" he muttered, getting to his feet and gingerly rubbing his broad backside. "First time in my worthless life I ever see a dumb animal commit suicide."

He peered into the murk, saw the dogs' heads cutting V's in the sea as they swam steadily away. Even though he railed against the nuisance of keeping three dogs aboard, on the sly, he fed and petted them; for they had come to be as much a part of the *Sally L.* as he was himself or any member of his crew. Yes, he loved those battle-scarred veterans of countless canine battles.

He roared "Hiram! Sta'boa'd your helm!"

"Sta'boa'd she be, Cap'n," came Hiram Hillgate's resinous voice from out of the fog.

Captain Barnabus watched critically as the vessel quivered at the pull of the rudder The bowsprit swung.

"Now ease her!"

"Ease 'er, Cap'n."

"Steady as she goes!"

"Steady as she goes, Cap'n."

Captain Barnabas watched the bow settle in the wake of the fast-swimming dogs. What those fool animals were up to now, he didn't know; but they were wise old brutes and he would back them to the limit.

THE schooner had lost some headway; swirling wraiths of fog cut off his vision and he lost sight of the swimming dogs. However, the *Sally L.* soon regained her speed and added to it perhaps a knot and a half on the new course, Captain Barnabas judged.

He spent several anxious minutes before he saw the dogs again. When he did see them, he was further puzzled to find that they were swimming in a small circle. All at once they closed in on the same spot and started barking.

Although each day on the Banks brought its oddities, Captain Barnabas was both astonished and alarmed to see the dogs making up into a knot of struggling bodies. He wasn't sure, veiled as his vision was by fog and spray, but he thought he caught sight of a fourth head. Then he heard it, startling in that empty immensity of sky and sea: the sound of a man's voice, raised in forlorn prayer.

"Oh, God, I thank thee for sending these magnificent dogs, for I can swim no longer."

That cry was feeble, hardly more than an echo lost upon that lonely waste of waters.

"Hard a-port!" Captain Barnabas roared.

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"Hard a-port, Cap'n," Hillgate repeated. The *Sally L.* swung, snapped into the wind and hung there with sails slatting. Her broad stern swept close to the struggling knot of life striving to keep above the waters.

Captain Barnabas caught sight of a white head of hair, shading a high forehead and near-sighted eyes; the nose was thin, high-bridged, the mouth, pinched yet generous and kindly, and the chin weak. All in all, Captain Barnabas judged, it was the face of a thinker, an indoors man.

Then the dogs swung toward the schooner. The hound and the Airedale swam either side of the man whose thin-fleshed hands grasped their collars. While, directly in front, powerful jaws clamped to the man's necktie, churned the bulldog.

"Unf'f! Unf'f!" barked Torn-lip, the Airedale.

Captain Barnabas hustled to the starboard mainshrouds. Here his plump hands deftly knotted a running bowline in a rope's end which he cast over the man's head. The man thrust first one thin arm through it, then the other. Captain Barnabas heaved, the bowline tightened. The man was drawn to the vessel's side and lifted bodily. Dead-eye, the bulldog, letting go when he sensed that his services were no longer needed.

The rescued man clung to a shroud, too weak to step over the low railing. His gray trousers and white shirt were plastered to his frail body. Captain Barnabas helped him across the scuppers, then he lifted both the Airedale and the hound to the deck by means of the bowline drawn taut about their bodies. The old bulldog, however, preferred to cling to the line with his teeth; he scrambled up the side of the hull as Captain Barnabas pulled.

"I thank you, sir," the rescued man said, teeth chattering from chill.

Captain Barnabas took the stub of a cigar out of his mouth and spat over the side. "Don't mention it, mister. Lucky for you them dratted dogs o' Homer's smelled you or heard you; another half minute an' we'd a-sailed by."

"Thank God," the man said, placing his hand before his eyes and bowing his head.

"You ain't no fisherman, I cal'ate," Captain Barnabas prodded. "Or, if you be, you're the first one I ever see wear a white shirt and yellow necktie out here on the Banks."

THE man fumbled for the black ribbon that dangled from about his neck and drew a pair of nose glasses from under his shirt. "A little while longer in that water and I would have drowned. Only faith and prayer upheld me, I do believe, for I never was a good swimmer."

"Fell overboard, eh?" Captain Barnabas asked bluntly, ready to bristle. "Dragger cap'n, eh?"

"I am a collector."

"Eh!" Captain Barnabas muttered, quite startled and uneasy.

He stared at the little man narrowly; blamed if he didn't look like a bill collector, at that. For three months now, with debts mounting, and fishing bad, Captain Barnabas had had his creditors or their lawyers or agents pester the life out of him every time he made the land. They had got him to worrying so much that he'd taken to chewing his cigars instead of smoking them, a bad habit he admitted even to himself. This was the first time, however, that a bill collector had ever come a hundred miles offshore to dun him. He shook his grizzled head morosely; times must be getting pretty bad, indeed, on shore.

"An ecologist," the little man further explained.

"A what?"

"Ecology is the study of biology having to do with the inter relations between organisms and their environments."

"Oh," Captain Barnabas said weakly. "Is that so? But I thought you said you was a collector?"

"True. I collect whales."

With the mention of whales Captain Barnabas felt as if he were getting better acquainted with the little man. Also, he felt considerably relieved. He had nothing against whalers; in fact, he had a sneaking admiration for the shell-backed breed.

"Well, how's whalin', Cap'n?" Captain Barnabas asked sociably, happier now that he knew his debts didn't have to be discussed.

"The title's professor, sir," the little man said. "C. T. Rathbone, director of the Peabody Museum of Whaling."

"Glad to know you, professor," Captain

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Barnabas said, stretching forth a friendly paw. "My handle's Barnabas Lee, skipper and owner o' this here hooker."

Then Captain Barnabas scratched his greying thatch of hair in sudden thought. Where had he heard that name before? It was sort of familiar. Yes, he had it; he'd heard the name on that radio program of Homer Sims'. Now he wasn't at all sure that he was glad to see this little professor at all; for the simple reason that Homer Sims had become much too interested in whales of late.

The professor's faded eyes cast troubled glances at Captain Barnabas. "I got up before daylight this morning, hoping to catch sight of a certain white whale reported seen in these waters. Just about dawn, I saw him. In my excitement I slipped from the railing and fell overboard, unbeknown to a soul on the dragger."

Captain Barnabas shook his head in sympathy.

These landlubbers took some gosh awful chances. However, he doubted if the professor had seen a white whale, or any whale at all, for that matter; likely what he had seen was a derelict spar, bleached by the action of the brine and the sun.

Sims' walrus-like voice boomed down the fog shrouded decks. "Who ye talkin' to, Cap'n? Ha! A visitor, by the cross-eyed periwinkle!"

"Yes, Homer. Them chewed up dogs o' your'n jumped overboard and rescued the poor feller."

"Fine dogs," the rescued man said with heartfelt appreciation.

THE aged hound waved his long tail, while the Airedale and the bulldog, equally aged, vibrated their stubs. All three splashed hot tongues against the professor's cold hands. Captain Barnabas' liking for the little man rose another degree; anyone who could honestly call Sims' ragged brutes fine dogs must be all right.

"Yes, sir," Sims said, murky eyes gleaming in pride. "Them dawgs be the best sailors we got aboard the *Sally L.* I got 'em at a bargain from the dog pound; fifty cents for the three of 'em. The dawg catcher had much as forty of 'em. He likes dawgs pow'ful well an' has to keep 'em hid from the taxpayers so's he won't have to kill the poor critters. He's thinned down to a whisper, a-tryin' to keep 'em fed."

"My, my," Professor Rathbone murmured abstractly. "I never before saw such huge specimens of their breeds. Purebloods, too, I see."

Sims nodded his immense head happily. "Yes, sir! I cal'ate they be. You see this here houn'; I calls him One-ear, 'count he's lost a ear, which makes him carry his head cocked at a fifteen degree sta'boa'd list. The bulldog I calls Dead-eye, 'count he's lost a eye; I cal'ate that's why his good eye gleams so turrible wicked like. Then this here Airedale had her sta'boa'd lip chewed off some fight or other; makes her look real fierce, don't it, now. She's the on'y she one, an' I calls her Torn-lip."

"Now, Homer, me b'y," Captain Barnabas admonished. "We got plenty time to talk about your varmints later on. We got to get the professor down in the fo'c'sle and dried out."

Professor Rathbone, however, kept the rapt glance of his blue eyes on Sims' dogs. "Hm'n! Amazing! Such size. It would be interesting to perform a genetic experiment on them."

"Oh, no, ye don't," Sims growled, alarmed.

The professor coughed, dryly. "No harm would come to them. In fact, I think they'd like it, mated to the opposite sex of the breed, of course."

"Oh," Sims said, relieved yet dubious. "The two he ones might, but the she one be too old, I cal'ate."

"Now, Homer," Captain Barnabas admonished again, "you quit pesterin' this feller till we get him below and some hot rum under that wet shirt."

Sims nodded his craggy head. "He do look as if he needed a snort. He's turned blue as a lobster."

"What's the trouble, Cap'n?" Hillgate called, craning his long neck to see past the mainsail.

"Put her back on her course, Hiram," Captain Barnabas ordered. "Homer's critters only jumped overboard and rescued a city feller, swimming."

Even though Hillgate was talking philosophically to himself the words carried through the fog. "By the great horned sculpin! Swimming out here, eh, a hundred

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mile from land! The older I get the more crazy them city fellers do act."

Captain Barnabas chuckled, led his distinguished guest forward and ushered him down into the forecastle.

THE day passed without further incident, except that Captain Barnabas became uneasily aware Homer Sims was showing unusual interest in whaling in particular and the pursuit of science in general. An alarming sign; for Sims, as a rule, led the life of a bivalve, sleeping most of the time and only coming out of his shell long enough to answer the calls of nature. He worked only when driven, but his immense strength was a decided asset to the vessel.

Sims, at this moment, down in the *Sally L.*'s snug forecastle, had the gaze of his murky eyes fastened on the parchment like features of the museum professor. Captain Barnabas, peering down from the deck above, noted that Professor Rathbone was lecturing. He was decidedly happy in his subject, for he glowed and his voice was vibrant. It didn't seem to matter that he had only one interested listener; Homer Sims was as fascinated as if he were capable of understanding the professor's chain syllable words. All the other trawlers, apparently, had long since gone to sleep in self defence.

"Now, sir, take the white whale," the professor intoned. "Balaena—"

"Where ye got 'im?" Sims asked.

"That is the question, sir." The little professor nodded ecstatically. "We've got him to get. I saw him, sir! He rose to blow not more than fifty feet from the dragger, early this morning. He was a fine specimen, *balaena mysticetus*, a right or bowhead whale. As pretty a boy as I ever saw, a bull; he gleamed like a reef of white coral in the reflected light of the sunrise."

"White, eh!" Sims pursed his heavy lips. "I've heard tell of 'em. I cal'ate they're rare like blue lobsters; I seen a blue lobster once."

"Ah! To possess that specimen." The professor tweaked his thin nose in wishful thought. "Secure that whale for me, my man, and the Society is prepared to pay you the sum of ten thousand dollars."

Sims closed his small eyes while guile rippled the smooth skin of his bronzed cheeks. One would have taken it for granted that the big man was thinking of what he could do with such a big sum; but Captain Barnabas knew better. Sims cared little for money; what he did covet, though, was to shine in the limelight. He opened his eyes and bent close to the professor.

"Sh'h!" he whispered. "I'll tell ye a secrut: I ain't Homer Sims a-tall."

The professor looked at Sims in some wonder. "But your captain said—"

Sims winked knowingly. "I got 'em all fooled aboard this vessel. Truth is, I be Charlie Wumpus, one time chief harpooner o' the whaler *Roland D. Breckall*. I uster kill so many whales that every whaler on the seven seas got jealous of me. Yes, they did! Then they got mad, and it go so my life wan't wu'th a plug nickel, an' me with a Mrs. an' thirteen children—"

A knot of a man, bewhiskered face bristling in rage, jumped on Sims' great back from an upper bunk. "Ye devil spotted liar! What ye mean a-tryin' to steal my name, pussonal'ty and my undying fame as a harpooner?"

"Ouch! Leggo!" Sims reached up a huge paw, plucked his fiery antagonist from his bull neck and held him in midair, staring at him in puzzlement. "Lil' feller, where did ye come from? Ye must be that new man we signed on in Honolulu."

Charlie Wumpus squirmed. "Sot me down, ye durn fool, 'fore I kicks a hole in your face."

"Now ye gotta behave yourself," Sims bade, mildly. "We don't stan' for ary shennigans aboard the *Roland D. Breckall*."

"Fust time ye ever heard tell of the *Breckall* was when I told ye about her," Wumpus shrilled.

"Aw, shuddup," came a sleepy growl from a lower bunk. "Crazy as loons, the both of ye."

A SHADOW of uneasiness crossed over Captain Barnabas' kindly features. Here Sims had gone and talked himself into the grip of another of his strange spells. The fool! Chief harpooner aboard the *Roland D. Breckall*, indeed! Captain Barnabas had known Sims since Sims had been an overgrown babe in arms. He'd been such a big baby that no ordinary sized diapers would fit him. His poor mother had persuaded a sailmaker to fix him up with

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an especially rugged set from sea weathered canvas.

Captain Barnabas snorted. Well, he'd have to hustle aft to warn Hillgate; for when Sims got to believing he was someone else, he usually tried to get control of the vessel in order to go places. So Captain Barnabas rolled aft on his stocky legs.

"Now listen here, Hiram," he bade, leaning on the binnacle. "That Homer's been listenin' to them museum talks on the radio so much an', come to cap it all, to that half-baked professor, that he's gone an' hypnotized himself into believing he's chief harpooner aboard the *Roland D. Breckall.*"

Hillgate's long face cracked in a chuckle. "The *Breckall* foundered more'n fifty year ago in roundin' the Horn. She war old even then, I've heard tell. Ho! Ho! Ho! What'll that Homer think up next?"

"'Twon't be so funny, Hiram," Captain Barnabas snapped, tartly, "if Homer takes charge o' this vessel ag'in an' we lose out on a day or two o' good fishin'."

Hillgate pawed the smile from his mustached lips.

"'Nother thing," Captain Barnabas continued. "Homer's listened to Charlie Wumpus so often tell about his whalin' days that Homer thinks he's Charlie Wumpus himself. Poor old Charlie is as mad as blazes, accuses Homer of stealin' his thunder—"

Hillgate slapped a lank thigh in high glee. "He do now! I'd like to see that ol' shag's face."

"He's like one of them new-fangled atomic bombs, Charlie be," Captain Barnabas declared gloomily. "An' it don't take much of a spark to set 'im off. With him and Homer cuttin' up, might be you'll be laughin' from the t'other side o' your face, Hiram."

He stepped to the taffrail, turned his broad back on the chuckling Hillgate, and stared at the wake. Worry got such a grip on him that he discovered that he'd chewed up two good cigars without knowing it. He shrugged in disgust.

When any member of his crew needed help, he never failed them; even if it meant, as now, that he'd practically signed away his schooner to raise the necessary cash. With sickening realization he pictured them all being dumped unceremoniously on shore by the sheriff, the *Sally L.* changing ownership in the process. All for a measly twelve hundred dollars. One good catch of fish would clear away that nagging debt, but the fish had eluded him for weeks; and the day on which the note was due was nearly on top of him.

Captain Barnabas sighed. He had to keep his worries bottled up; if as much as a whisper leaked out, his crew, to a man, would lose their punch. Yes, they all looked up to him, had implicit faith in him, considered him infallible in any situation.

After all, the *Sally L.* was the only home most of them had; and none of them, being such eccentric chaps, would ever readily fit into another forecastle. Why, the poor souls might even pine away and die of home sickness, if they didn't starve to death ashore first—

SPLASH! Captain Barnabas stared. He saw hundreds of fins break the surface of that fog shrouded sea. Hundreds of glossy backs were streaming past, rank on close packed rank of lithe fleshed fish showing solid as far deep down in that water as he could see. Pollock! Each racing form, he judged, was a full half fathom from snout to tail if it was an inch.

"Dories over!" Captain Barnabas bellowed, hustling to drop the mainsail. "Hard a-port, Hiram!"

"Hard a-port, she be, Cap'n," Hillgate answered, palming the worn spokes.

Old Vreeley scuttled aft, chattering and cackling, favoring his newly healed leg. "Too thick to wet twine this afternoon, ain't it, Cap'n?"

"Fog ain't too bad, Oboe," Captain Barnabas said. "We got three hours yet 'fore sunset, 'countin' this new fangled daylight savin' time. You hop into one o' them dories an' sot one tub anyway."

"Oh, oh," old Vreeley half sobbed. "I just know we're goin'ter have bad luck; I can feel it in my bones."

Captain Barnabas plucked a fresh cigar from a vest pocket and chewed it thoughtfully, the while he studied old Vreeley's seamed face. The shrunken chap was a confirmed pessimist, he knew; still and all, when he up and declared that they were due to be visited by misfortune, it usually came.

"We need the money, Oboe," Captain

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Barnabas argued. "I don't like fog either, but we gotta take a few chances—"

Old Vreeley wrung his thin hands. "Oh, money won't do us ary bit o' good if'n we're sixty fathom down in Fiddler's Green."

Captain Barnabas became fretful when he discovered that old Vreeley had made him bite his cigar in two. "Now see what you've done, sp'iled this cigar—"

"Oh, ye done ut yourself," old Vreeley declared, plainly relieved to be off the subject of dory fishing in a fog mull.

"Aw, shuddup, you durn fool!" Captain Barnabas scowled. "Give the boys a hand to get them dories over. Lively, now!"

"Oh, ain't nobody on deck yet, 'cept Homer," old Vreeley said, limping to the starboard mainshrouds and peering over. "Oh, look at all the fish! I never did see so many purty fish in all my borned days. I bet we couldn't cotch a one, though, Cap'n."

Captain Barnabas stepped up beside old Vreeley, grasped a turnbuckle and leaned outboard. "Hm'n! What you think, Oboe?"

"I think them fish is bein' chased."

"What in tarnation would chase 'em?

"Ain't no tellin' 'bout fish. Might be, a whale—"

Captain Barnabas glared at old Vreeley. "Now you listen here, Oboe! Don't let me hear you spoutin' ary more remarks about whales! Ever since we give that Charlie Wumpus a home, all I've heard at every mess call is whales. Then atop that, the radio's took to talkin' whales. Then them dratted dogs o' Homer's fished that professor out'n the drink, him so durn set on whales he has to swim for 'em. Whales! Whales! And now they've all got poor Homer to thinkin' he's a whaleman."

"No, sir," old Vreeley said, abashed. "I won't mention 'em no more. Just the same, I think ut's a whale."

"Ow!" Captain Barnabas jerked his head back as if struck; one more mention of whales—

He turned, espied Sims' bulk limned against the shimmering foresail. "Ho! You, there, Homer! Tell your dorey mates to hit the deck 'fore they catch sleepin' sickness."

INSTEAD of obeying, Sims came on toward Captain Barnabas. He had an unnatural swagger to his great shoulders. When he had drawn close, Captain Barnabas, wrapped up in thoughts of a good catch of fish and a tidy profit, noted, too late, the odd light playing in Sims' eyes. With a sinking feeling he realized that the man peering from those hard eyes was not the meek and mild Homer Sims at all, but a dare-devil sort of chap who would stand for no nonsense from anybody.

"Now, Homer," Captain Barnabas said weakly.

"Oh, me!" old Vreeley wailed. "Homer's cotched 'nuther one of his spells."

Sims was plainly astonished. "Where'd ye two fellers come from anyway? How'd ye fellers get aboard the whale ship *Roland D. Breckall* 'way out here in the middle of the Pacific ocean? I never seed such desp'rit lookin' characters. I bet ye're pirates. I cal'ate I gotta tie ye up."

"Oh, no, ye don't" Captain Barnabas remonstrated.

"Don't ye das't!" old Vreeley chattered.

With a quick movement Sims grabbed Captain Barnabas by the vest and dragged him to the mast table. Despite his struggles and the weight of his fists against Sims' hard flesh, the captain couldn't free himself. Sims, possessed of the strength of three strong men ordinarily, and of more than twice three when in the grip of one of his fantastic states of self-hypnosis, now deftly lashed Captain Barnabas' wrists to a brass belaying pin in the mast table and his feet and knees to a brace and a ringbolt in the deck by means of a hank of groundline he had cut from a trawl.

In the meantime, old Vreeley clawed at Sims' great arms and kicked at his massive shins. Sims, however, protected by his knee length sea boots, only boomed in laughter at such puny blows.

The *Sally L.*, caught in the grip of the seaway, began to roll. Booms swooped from side to side. Sails slatted. Running rigging raced through blocks to the tune of purring sheaves. Forward, Sims' dogs shook the forecastle with their sudden clangor. Captain Barnabas groaned. Those brutes were like barometers presaging trouble.

Hillgate, drawn by the scuffling, the sounds of blows and squabble, dodged around the main boom and stared in astonishment at the scene presented around the mast table. Before he could step away

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to raise his fists, Sims collared him and tied him up neatly beside Captain Barnabas; and the lanky Hillgate was a strong man. Next, Sims whisked a few turns about old Vreeley's brittle body and left him hanging.

"This is mutiny, Homer," Captain Barnabas warned. "You'd better think twice—"

"What's the overgrown porpoise goin'ter think with?" Hillgate asked philosophically, working his cud of tobacco back under his teeth from the safety of his cheek.

Sims looked up and down the decks, puzzled. "Here we be all set to put the whaleboats over, an' they ain't ary sign of 'em or a crew. I can't figure it out. Cal'ate I better go for'ard an' let a couple o' them strange fellers out'n the fo'c'sle; where in tarnation they all come from, I dunno."

Captain Barnabas watched in despair as Sims strode forward on his mighty legs. Here the *Sally L.* had struck a rich pocket of fish, a regular gold mine, more than enough, he judged, to clear the schooner of debt, and that lummox of a Homer Sims had to get all keyed up and toss a marlingspike into the day's routine. Sweat beaded Captain Barnabas' forehead as he tried to free himself. As it was, they all had far too little time to get the dories into the sea and the baited trawls strung out. What with the enormous fleets of city-owned beam trawlers ruining the fishing by killing off the small fry, it might be weeks or months before they succeeded in striking another school of counters.

However, Captain Barnabas didn't have it in his heart to blame Sims unduly. Sims had more good points than bad and, after a time, would snap out of it and be himself again and, as usual, be ashamed. He was just another cross that Captain Barnabas had to bear, for not another skipper would put up with him.

Forward, Sims boomed. "Two of ye fellers come topside to help me run the *Breckall.* Oh, no, ye don't! Not ye big fellers. Get back now 'fore I push ye in the puss. I want ye two little squirts to come up: ye with the black ribbon anchorin' your store glasses an' ye ol' coot with the red whiskers. I cal'ate I can keep ye two under my thumb better. Whales be a spoutin' all about us. Now step lively!"

"Whales," Captain Barnabas moaned. "Prob'ly ain't ary whale within a thousand mile of us."

Hillgate chewed his ragged mustache. "Ain't no tellin' what'll happen when Homer gets on the rampage."

"If'n they's a whale within a thousand mile," old Vreeley declared, "that Homer'll draw the critter like a revivalist draws sin. We might even get upsot. I seen a vessel capsized by a whale once—"

"Aw, shuddup," Captain Barnabas bade, testily. "What'd I tell ye—?"

Old Vreeley's leathery face reddened in a shaft of setting sun which pierced the fog. "I can't help ut, Cap'n. I'm afeared o' whale critters."

"Well, forget 'em, then."

"I don't das't." Old Vreeley stared at the fog shrouded waters, worry showing in his deep-sunken eyes. "One o' them critters might creep up on us."

"Aw, ye durn fool," Captain Barnabas muttered in disgust; yet his heart was softened by the old fellow's fear.

THE Captain peered forward. Besides Professor Rathbone and Charlie Wumpus, Sims had allowed his three dogs to come up on deck. The great brutes were slavering about Sims' legs, showing that they were aware of the strangeness in their master. Sims strode down the deck toward the mainmast, Captain Barnabas watching him narrowing for any sign of weakness, either physical or mental that he could influence Sims with, but he could disover none.

Despite Charlie Wumpus' shrill remonstrance, Sims hustled him aft. "Now ye freeze onto that helm, lil' feller. Ain't ye ashamed of yourself, sayin' as how ye're Charlie Wumpus when I be myself. I don't cal'ate ye ever seed a whale let alone catch one."

"Ye crazy durn fool!" Wumpus railed, spluttering like a burning knot of red pine. "I'll get back at ye, I will. Ye just wait an' see!"

"Ho! Ho!" Sims laughed.

Captain Barnabas nearly got a kink in his neck, craning his head around so as to see what was going on at the wheel. Wumpus was easing the vessel back into the grip of the wind, too good a seaman to let her bang her seams open.

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In the meantime, Professor Rathbone, now clad again in his own dried out clothes, except for borrowed hat and shoes, both too large for him, stared uncertainly at the three men bound to the mast table.

"My, my," he murmured, as if he couldn't quite believe his senses. "This won't do. Whatever in the world is going on board this boat? She was so peaceful only a short time ago, everyone so nice and friendly and sympathetic. I—I dont understand."

"P's's't! Professor!" Captain Barnabas hissed. "Ontie these knots like a good feller. That infernal Homer—"

The professor plucked at his under lip, agitated. "I—I—"

"Quick, professor," Captain Barnabas urged. "Take the ropin' knife out'n my pants' pocket and cut these lashin's. If you don't, I'll log you for mutiny along o' that dratted Homer."

Frightened by the word mutiny, Professor Rathbone's weak eyes showed sudden determination. "Yes, to be sure. You must be freed. Why, you're the captain."

However, when it came to knots and knives and picking pockets, the good professor was clumsy and out of his element. He dropped Captain Barnabas' broad bladed knife twice before he succeeded in opening it. Captain Barnabas cast anxious looks aft. He groaned. Sims was coming toward them.

"Hey!" Sims bellowed. "Don't ye das't cut them fellers loose! Them's pirates. Drap that gut opener, lil' feller, 'fore I throws ye overboard!"

The poor professor, unaware that Sims had been close, stiffened convulsively. The knife, the keen edge of which was about to cut through Captain Barnabas' bonds, thudded to the deck.

Sims caught the professor by one fragile shoulder, turned him around and poked a finger as big as the maingaff into the startled man's face. "I thought ye told me, Cappy, that ye wanted to cotch that white whale ye seed?"

The gray little professor nodded, an ecstatic expression mellowing his profile. "To supervise the mounting of that white whale would be the culminating achievement of my life. To read a paper before the Society—"

"Well, then," Sims boomed, "what're we waitin' for then? I cal'ate ye must've been a great whaler in your day, Cappy. Ye knows more about whales 'n ary soul I ever was shipmates with. Now, give me a hand to get these sails hove taut—"

With the approach of dusk the fog scaled away somewhat, allowing the sinking sun to paint the *Sally L.* in glowing colors. Suddenly the light faded and night began to breathe life into the creeping shadows.

CAPTAIN BARNABAS was more disgruntled than he had been in a blue moon. He craned his neck to peer aft. He observed that Charlie Wumpus was so angry that his graying red whiskers crackled and shot off sparks every time they rubbed against the collar of his oilskin jacket.

With darkness, the fog shut down again, penetrating, chill and dank. Captain Barnabas shivered. He had a kink in his neck, his feet were being pricked by countless needles and he felt sleepy. Much to his annoyance, Hillgate and old Vreeley started bickering.

"I'm hungry," old Vreeley said.

"So'm I."

"I'm goin'ter call Homer."

"Nope! Don't do it! I wouldn't give in to him enough for that."

Nevertheless, old Vreeley raised a clamor until his voice cracked like a broken spar. The deck shook under Sims' hurried approah.

"We gotta eat, Homer," old Vreeley croaked.

Sims clucked in concern; he went forward but soon returned. "Them strange fellers I got locked in the fo'c'sle won't send up no grub less'n I lets 'em out."

"Strange fellers, indeed!" Captain Barnabas snorted. "You durn fool, Homer! You've known 'em all your life."

"Ts'k! Ts'k!" Sims clucked. "I do believe everybody aboard this vessel be crazy, 'cept me an' ol' Cappy Rathbone here."

Sims went off, following the dictates of his overly stimulated imagination. The professor followed him like an emaciated shadow, obviously quite happy in the thoughts that he had found a boon companion at last, a man as enthusiastic about catching whales as he was himself.

It was now so dark and the swirling mist was so thick that Captain Barnabas could no

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longer see what Sims was up to. However, he heard a thumping sound on the dek, aft; he was puzzled, unable to figure out what the big man was doing. Then he heard a creaking as of something being turned, the sounds of hissing steel and the splash of water. So Sims had taken the grindstone out of the lazaretto, eh!

"How she comin', Cappy?" Sims' voice came out of the night.

"I don't have the strength to hold it properly," came the professor's, breathing heavily.

"Hm'm!" Sims mused. "I cal'ate ye better crank an' I'll grind."

"It's got to be razor sharp," the professor stated, his aged voice commening to quaver from weariness.

"I but she'd cut a hair now," Sims said. "Ye gettin' tired?"

"I'll give it a dozen more turns," the professor said in a dogged voice. "We can't fail. It's got to pierce the heart."

"Yes, sir," Sims agreed. "Havin' it sharp enough to cut a hair ain't enough. We gotta put n' edge on it that 'ud split a whisker."

"Cap'n! Cap'n!" old Vreeley suddenly wailed. "They're goin'ter murder us right in our boots. Can't ye hear 'em whisperin'?"

"Keep quiet, will you, Oboe," Captain Barnabas bade sternly. "There's times when you do try my patience. 'Course they ain't goin' to murder us. Homer's a mite daft, maybe, but he's got a kind heart. Them fellers are only makin' whale talk."

Old Vreeley subsided, relieved. "Oh, they be, eh."

Sims' voice came again. "Ye think this here harpoon I made'll do the trick?"

"Perfect," the professor said. "And with your magnificent strength to drive it—"

Captain Barnabas felt a hot tongue lave his hands, smelled the odor of wet fur. Sims' dogs were whimpering, sensing that some undue excitement was afoot.

"Chew these knots, Head-eye, nice feller," Captain Barnabas cajoled.

The bulldog only padded away into the seeping fog. Captain Barnabas dozed. Fortunately it was a warm night despite the fog. However, he was wet, tired and hungry, a combination to make him quite unhappy when laid against the thoughts of losing that nice school of fish. If it hadn't been for Sims' foolishness, those fish would be in the hold right now, iced down, and the *Sally L.* would be bound for market. Likely, all expenses considered, there wouldn't have been enough profit to pay off the note on the schooner, but it would have taken care of the interest and a chunk of the principal, at least. Well, no use to cry over that now, he reflected; for his blessed schooner was already as good as gone by the board.

HAVING spent several fretful hours sandwiched in between old Vreeley's complaints and Hillgate's philosophical comments on Sims in particular and life in general, Captain Barnabas awoke with a start. He observed that the wind had died. The vessel had lost steerage way and now was being rocked gently by the sea, as if abandoned. Fog laved his face, a cloying mist so thick that he was unable to see beyond his nose. The long familiar odors of gurry soaked decks, bleached canvas and frayed rigging were now strong in his nostrils. The night itself snuffled as if in trouble.

Alarmed, Captain Barnabas raised his voice. "Ho!"

Not a sound.

Then old Vreeley whimpered. "Oh, oh, ye scart me, Cap'n! I cal'ate I must've dozed off."

"Me, too," Hillgate grunted.

Captain Barnabas discovered that the heat from his body had dried out the gut groundline sufficiently so that he could work his hands. He got his fingers around the belaying pin, shoved it up bit by bit until its flat lower end was flush with the lower part of the mast table. Then he poked it through with one finger. He heard it thud to the deck, behind him. He then freed his wrists of the trawl line, untied his legs and feet, and freed old Vreeley and Hillgate.

Being accustomed to far greater hardships during a lifetime on the Banks, Captain Barnabas lost no time in feeling sorry for himself, but started down the starboard side. Hillgate and old Vreeley followed. The wheel was creaking mournfully, no human hand upon it to warm its spokes. Nor was there any human or canine form upon those decks. Seized by sudden suspicion, Captain Barnabas counted the nested dories.

"Gone," he muttered.

"Gone," came old Vreeley's hollow echo

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out of the fog, as if the earth itself had sped away from his weary feet, leaving him hanging like a lost soul in interplanetary space, for all time. "Gone, gone."

"Aw, shuddup," Hillgate bade. "Durned if they ain't times when ye gives a feller the creeps, Oboe. Whut's gone, Cap?"

"Homer's dory. I cal'ate he must've took old Charlie, an' that old professor an' his moth-eaten dogs an' gone huntin'."

"Huntin'! In a night like this? Huntin' whut, for Pete's sake?"

"Whales."

"Why, the durn fools couldn't even see one, let alone harpoon one."

"I dunno," Captain Barnabas said. "They know more about them critters 'n I do. 'Sides, them dogs has pretty keen noses. I'm worried, though; they might get lost."

"Not Charlie Wumpus," old Vreeley sniffed, enviously. "That ol' coot's drunk so much rum in the last seventy years, his brain floats on it, like a compass. P'ints true no'th, it do. Couldn't lose him nohow."

Captain Barnabas chuckled, and felt better.

"Cal'ate you're right, Oboe."

HE STARTED forward, the suction grip of his rubber boots firm upon the wet deck. He removed the wooden pin that locked the forecastle hatch, shoved open the slide and peered down into the warm pocket of darkness. Only snores and the smells of sleeping men greeted him. His crew, bless their simple souls, placed their trust in their Maker. He descended and lighted the deck-head lamp; it swayed in its gimbals, fat sides gleaming brassily in its own reflection.

Hank Barlow sat up in his bunk, yellow eyes winking sleepily. "What's been goin' on, Cap'n? That fool, Homer—"

Captain Barnabas explained. Old Vreeley and Hillgate cut in with their comments.

"Don't that beat all!" Barlow rumbled in his deep chest. "If we'd a knowed that, we'd a bru'k open the hatch. You fellers might've caught pneumonia."

"I'm glad you didn't try to break out, Hank," Captain Barnabas said. "I'd sooner get a leg broken than have the old girl scratched up. Now, seein' as you're all slept out, Hank, me b'y, I guess you better go up on deck and stand watch. Ring the bell. Them durn fools might hear it an' want to come back."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Barlow said, reaching for the coffee pot.

Captain Barnabas sighed. Yes, he'd see that the *Sally L.* got good care even if he were to lose her and she to be touched by profane hands a few days hence.

By the time Captain Barnabas had eaten a hearty breakfast and climbed topside again, he saw that gray bear paws of light were beginning to claw away the curtains of darkness in the east. An hour later, the sun broke through, hot and smoking, and burnt away a week's fog mull as if by magic. Wind ruffled the smooth surface of the sea. Barlow stepped to the wheel and caught the sails in the stiffening breeze.

Captain Barnabas raised his worn binoculars to his eyes. Then he stiffened in sudden excitement as the powerful lens lifted a picture from the surface of that calm sea and brought it close.

"Bless my barnacles!" he breathed, awed. "Durned if them fellers ain't raised a whale! He's a big critter, too; been asleep all night, I cal'ate, an' don't know it's day yet. I bet he'll weigh about eighty ton."

"Oh, let me see, Cappy!" old Vreeley begged, big ears flapping as he danced in curiosity.

"And there's Homer," Captain Barnabas continued, shaking off old Vreeley's clutching fingers. "He's a standin' up in the bow o' that big bull dory o' his, an' the professor and Charlie be a rowin' it. That glitter you boys see is the barb o' Homer's harpoon. He's a raisin' it, up, up, back over his shoulder. Homer's stripped to the waist, he be. What a man! Them muscles! Aye! An' them dogs must've smelled that whale critter out, I cal'ate, for they're swimmin' ahead o' the dory. Now they're cuttin' around that whale, Dead-eye towards the head, Torn-lip amidships, an' ol' One-ear a-takin' the tail."

"What color's that critter?. Hillgate asked, for once too keyed up to shoot a straight stream of tobacco juice over the taffrail and sluicing down Captain Barnabas' ear instead.

"A dirty gray," Captain Barnabas said. "But I guess we could stretch a p'int for the professor's sake and call the critter white."

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"What they doin' now, Cappy?" old Vreeley chattered, winking his weak eyes.

"They're gettin' closer, closer, only about four fathom away now," Captain Barnabas said, heart beginning to pound. "Oh, why don't the durn fool let drive that harpoon before the critter wakes up an' sounds? Now they're only about three fathom, now two. Now they're right on top of him! Ow—!"

"Tell us, Cappy," old Vreeley begged, trembling in his eagerness as he clutched Captain Barnabas' rigid arm.

"Ow!" Captain Barnabas shouted, yanking his arm away and waving it. "He's done it, boys! Our Homer's done it. I'd say he drove that harpoon plumb to the heart. The critter's riz half the ocean as if a barr'l o' TNT had let go. Dory's capsized, an' all hands a-swimmin'. Poor One-ear grabbed a-holt o' that critter's tail an' he's been slatted 'bout a half-mile into the air; an' I cal'late poor Dead-eye's gone for good, swallowed up when that whale opened his mouth."

"I never in all my borned days!" old Vreeley wailed, half-scared out of his wits.

"Swing her around, Hank," Captain Barnabas ordered. "We gotta help 'em. 'Twould break their hearts if they lost that whale. The critter's sounded! Now if we can get a-holt o' that harpoon line an' snubbed around the winch—"

FIVE minutes later the *Sally L.* stood by. For the second time in twenty-four hours, the professor was rescued from the sea. Now his pale eyes gleamed in happy expectancy, although he became a trifle shamefaced when confronted by Captain Barnabas' steady gaze. Next, Charlie Wumpus was plucked from the bottom of the overturned dory; he was puffing through his whiskers, as happy as a bird dog caught poaching in a marsh on a rainy day.

He pointed overside at Sims, still swimming, and chortled. "Yes, sirree! I'll make that big feller into a harpooner yet."

Suddenly, the great brute broke the surface of the sea, close aboard. Full two-thirds of his monstrous bulk arced into the air. Then he fell back, splashing a torrent of spray as high as the *Sally L.'s* topmasts. He opened his great mouth and—to Captain Barnabas' wonder—spewed out Dead-eye with his last dying gasp. Then he lay still, awash in the mounting whitecaps, which slowly reddened with his blood.

The minutes now passed swiftly. Captain Barnabas was kept much too busy helping secure the whale to the schooner's port side to cultivate further rancor against Sims. The giant mammal was longer than the *Sally L.'s* sixty-five feet, and the professor was so pleased that he cut capers on the deck like a boy.

As for Charlie Wumpus, whose boyhood and early manhood had been passed aboard whale ships, he swelled up in importance like a tough pine knot soaked in vinegar. By rigging a gadget consisting of the hand-cranked foghorn, a length of rubber hose used for pumping bilges and an automobile muffler taken from among the ballast, he succeeded in forcing enough air into the whale to keep it afloat.

In the meantime, the three dogs, little the worse for wear except for a few bruises, lined the rail, looking down upon the whale and growling. They couldn't seem to get over their wonder at the size of this wild game that they had helped raise and kill. They would trot up to the trawlers and the little professor, wag their tails, and then hasten back to the scuppers to sniff and bark. Old Dead-eye's one eye gleamed in pride as if he realized that even in the heyday of bull baiting there never had been a ring as vast as the ocean nor a bull as big as this whale.

Sims, however, reaction having set in and shaken him free of his self-induced state of hypnosis, sought the forecastle. He slumped down on a coil of manila and stared at Captain Barnabas in profound dejection. Shame had robbed him of any satisfaction that he could take in his deed.

"I be awful sorry, Cap'n," he said. "I can't hardly believe I done them turrible things Charlie says I did."

"Aw, forget it, Homer," Captain Barnabas bade, gruffly. "We've all got our weak moments."

Humming a tune of the gay nineties, the professor descended into the forecastle. He beamed.

"I do believe that it was more than wishful thinking," he said, taking a wallet from his pocket, unwinding several thicknesses of oiled silk and plucking out a pink slip of

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paper, "when I made this check out a month ago. May I borrow your pen?"

"Here you be, sir," Captain Barnabas grunted, pulling loose a steel pen and a bottle of ink that he kept wedged in a tiny shelf above his bunk.

On the line "Pay to the Order of" the professor carefully scrolled in the name Homer Sims. Captain Barnabas blinked.

"I assume Homer Sims is your real name," the professor winked.

Sims nodded, sheepishly.

"Heh, heh!" Charlie Wumpus' whiskers broke in a fierce grin. "Tried to steal me pussonal'ty, he did."

The professor handed the check to Sims. "For one white whale, delivered and accounted for, with the compliments of the Boston Genetic Society and the Peabody Museum of Whaling."

Sims' craggy face broke into a pleased smile. "Well, sir, I be much obliged. I'll just turn it over to Cap Barnabas here so's he can divvy it up betwixt all hands."

Captain Barnabas stared at that check, somewhat ashamed of himself for the hard thoughts he had so recently harbored against Sims. He knew that Sims would have been just as pleased had the check been made out for ten dollars instead of ten thousand. He reached under his mattress, pulled out a box of cigars and handed it to the professor.

"Ever use the weed, Jake?" he asked sociably. "Might perk you up a bit."

"Don't mind if I do, sir," the professor said. "It's been thirty-one years since I enjoyed my last smoke. My wife, you know—"

Captain Barnabas winked. "You didn't have to tell us, Jake, old boy. What us fellers do to home an' what we do aboard ship is two different stories."

Captain Barnabas winked. "You don't the first time in many a harried week, puffed away contentedly, on his cigar. The professor, he reflected, was a pretty regular chap even if he was educated. Because of the professor and Sims, Captain Barnabas had his schooner back. For awhile, at least, his mind was freed of the awful thought of seeing his crew thrown ashore, forlorn, unhappy and hungry.

That check was like a dependable anchor to windward.

To Papa Bianco watering the posies in his Greenwich Village patio, only the heat of a New York summer seemed of importance. . . . So when the words floated down to him, he could only stammer in wonder—*"There's a dead man in your garden!"*

"DEAD MEN DO TELL TALES"

by Day Keene

In the next issue of SHORT STORIES

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Indians All Right — Headed for Powder River and the Crow Country; Hungry and Feelin' Mean

THE BEST WAY OUT

By BEN T. YOUNG

HAVING finished stapling some loose wire onto the posts of our east line-fence, I was riding up Thunder Creek toward home. Then I saw them, off to the left toward Pumpkin Buttes. I couldn't believe it, and stood in my stirrups and stared. But my eyes weren't fooling me.

At first I was only excited. Then, remembering that Pa would be away overnight, I was scared, and roweled old Teddy into a high lope. "Indians!" I yelled, leaning from the saddle toward the open door of the kitchen.

Standing with her back to me, my sister Lyda just went on staring out of the window at the distant Black Hills. Ma, though, left off rolling biscuit dough and looked up. "Ira, you've been reading too many Buffalo Bill yarns," she said. "And you know better than to run a horse like that."

"But, Ma!" I panted. "There are Indians, a whole jag of them, just a whoop'n-a-holler yonder and headed this way."

"Nonsense," Ma said, taking up the biscuit cutter. "You imagine things. The Indians are all on reservations, peaceable as can be. Now hush your chatter and get ready for supper. Afterward, you must practice on your cornet else you'll never be good enough

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to play in an Army band like your Uncle Will."

While I was unsaddling, old Cactus came bow-legging out of the barn. "Indians are headed this way and Ma won't believe it," I told him.

"Don't blame 'er none," he grinned, squinting at the sun settling over the Big Horns. "If you wasn't jest a patch-pants kid I'd think you'd been drinkin'. The Injuns buried the hatchet right after the Wounded Knee fight. That were in December 1890, most sixteen years ago, before you was born."

"Maybe so," I said, packing my saddle and bridle into the barn while Teddy rolled and grunted. "But I saw Indians, three four hundred of 'em."

Calm as a puddle, Cactus went on shaping a smoke. "Squaws with 'em?"

"Yes," I said. "And kids and dogs."

Cactus fired a match with his thumbnail. "Then even if you wasn't seein' spooks, they ain't no war party. Could be some little ol' outfit got leave to go visitin' on 'nother reservation, mebbe Pine Ridge Sioux a-goin' up to see the Crows or Cheyennes. Now there's your Ma a-whangin' the supper bell. We'd best go eat."

"Where's Wilse?" I asked, looking toward the bunkhouse.

Cactus grinned again. "Him'n Lyda had a dust-up and it looks as though they're all done and the dishes washed. Wilse has went."

Now we are up against a knot, I told myself while slicking up at the wash-bench beside the back door. *Pa gone, Wilse gone, and Cactus too old and puny to be much help should the Indians get snorty.*

Aside from the need for Wilse right then, I was upset because he'd pulled freight for good. Like Pa, Wilse is lanky and soft-spoken; and a top hand with critters, a rope and a gun. I'd counted on having him for a brother-in-law. Now it looked as though Lyda, who is peppery like Ma, had torn things wide open.

During the first part of the meal nobody said a word. Like most ranch-hands, Cactus never talks while eating, but Ma and Lyda usually chatter like magpies. This evening, though, they were quiet as a meeting-house on a Monday; and Lyda looked ready to bawl.

I kept my jaw hobbled too. What with those Indians in the neighborhood, and Wilse gone out of our lives, I felt hump-backed with trouble.

WE'D just started on our canned peaches and cookies when I heard what I'd had my ears cocked for, a clatter that set my heart to thumping fit to spring my ribs. Jumping up, I peered out the front window. The road was filled with buck Indians, gabbling squaws and kids, kicking and squealing ponies, and yipping dogs. Already they were opening the wire gate and boiling into the yard.

"My stars, you were right!" Ma gasped, almost in my ear. "I wouldn't have believed it. But they can't camp here!"

"Best take it easy, ma'am," Cactus cautioned as she started for the front door. "Lemme palaver with 'em, if I can. By the looks I'd say them's Utes, and likely don't talk much white-man. But I know some Cheyenne lingo, and mebbe—"

As though he'd run into a fence Cactus stopped, for right behind him three bucks had bulged in through the back door. "How!" one said as they all stared at the remains of the supper.

Backed against the stove Ma stared, speechless for once, and groping behind herself for the lid-lifter. I could hear Lyda's teeth rattling like a box of dice, and mine would have done likewise could I have got my lower jaw back into place. I'd expected Indians, expected them to make off with anything that wasn't nailed down outside, but I hadn't really thought they'd cross the door-sill.

Of us four whites, only Cactus didn't show he was spooked. "How?" he said pleasantly, getting up and facing them. *"Taku wilakarkala?"*

It was plain as paint that they didn't understand. They scowled at him, then the runt with a broken straw hat—he was black and wrinkled as a burnt boot—turned and yelped at a squaw unloading a travois beside the bunkhouse. She passed the word, and quick as a steel trap another buck showed up at the kitchen door.

Heftier than the others, he was greasy as a pack of old playing cards, and wore no Indian gear other than frazzled moccasins, and red cloth braided into his stringy hair.

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He had scars on his fat face that he sure hadn't got picking flowers. After palavering with the others for a minute, he turned on Cactus. *"Tado un pejuta sopa,"* he growled, pointing at the table.

"This jigger talks Cheyenne and says they want meat and coffee," Cactus reported to Ma over his shoulder. "Better start rustlin' somethin' fer these four, while I try to get 'em in a better humor than they is now."

Both grim as a trapper skinning a skunk, Ma and Lyda stroked the dying fire, started a fresh batch of coffee, and began slicing bacon. Cactus went on making signs and talking with the Indians. He hunkered down as though he wasn't the least afraid; and they did too, lined up along the baseboard. While they didn't seem to be armed, they sure were a scalp-shifting sight, sitting right there in our clean kitchen. And they made the place smell like a wolves' den.

"They're Utes, all right," Cactus said to Ma without taking his eyes off them. "This little cross-eyed squirt in overalls is Soccioff. The next one in the tore-up shirt is Red Cap. The jasper with the straw hat and underdrawers is Appah, and the big lout is Waro. They're White River Utes what got unsatisfied with their Unitah reservation over in Utah. They thought to move in with the Pine Ridge or Standing Rock Sioux yonder. Seems they was a-comin' peaceable enough, and avoidin' the towns and ranches, till they run out o' grub. Then they killed some mutton at a sheep camp down on Box Creek. The Mex'kin herder high-tailed fer Douglas and these fellers are spooked, knowin' the troops will be out to round 'em up. They're headed fer Powder River and the Crow country now, but are hungry and feelin' mean. I think, though, could I promise 'em a couple o' cows to butcher come mornin', they'll move on 'thout trouble."

"Well, this is a pretty how'd-you-do!" Ma sputtered, lighting the coal-oil lamp. "If President Roosevelt would keep our soldiers at home to protect the taxpayers from such as this, instead of having them over in those Philippine Islands which are absolutely none of our business—"

"We've got plenty of soldiers around if they knew about this," I cut in. "There are eight troops of the Sixth Cavalry over at Fort Meade."

"A hundred miles away!" Ma snapped. "We—" She stopped, because Waco was pointing at Lyda and jabbering at Cactus.

Cactus' stubbled jaw tightened, and his eyes flicked to Pa's rifle resting on its pegs over the doorway. He straightened up, and the Utes did too.

"Miz Sanborn," Cactus said between his teeth, "don't leave this stampede ye, but listen careful. Lyda's yaller hair has caught this Waro's eye and he wants to buy her fer a wife. He thinks I'm her pa, so I'll dicker like mebbe such a deal could go through. Feed 'em soon's you can; and while they're eatin', you drift quiet-like into your bedroom and get that spare pistol the boss keeps around. Don't show it, jest keep it handy inside your dress.

"Lyda, you go with your ma, but don't come back. Lock yourself in and shuck that dress fer a pair o' pants and warm shirt. Ira, jest go out casual, amble into the bunkhouse, and if them thieves ain't already took my gun, fetch it back inside your clothes."

Shaking like a short-haired dog in a sleet-storm I watched Ma slam the coffee-pot and skillet full of smoking bacon onto the table. Like buzzards the Utes swooped onto it; and while they were busy, Ma and Lyda made for the bedroom. Cactus was edging nearer the rifle over the door. I drifted out, then made far-apart tracks for the bunkhouse, looking as I ran.

The run-down broomtails had been turned into our horse pasture. The squaws were busy setting up teepees, and the young girls were packing water from the creek, and split sticks from our woodpile. Fires were flaring up everywhere, winking like red eyes in the dusk, and the bucks were lying around watching the house.

Little kids were pulling the soogans and blankets off Cactus' bed, but in the darkness they hadn't found his gun and I got it. Grabbing up his old cardigan jacket I put it on, and buttoned it over the gun stuck in the waistband of my jeans. Then I backtracked for the house.

Ma was standing before the closed door of her-and-Pa's bedroom. Her face was white and hard-set as though carved from limestone. She had her hands under her apron, and I knew they gripped Pa's pistol. Cactus was shaking his head at the Indians, then turned to Ma. "This Waro won't take no for an answer," he said, his voice squeaking

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like an iron tire on frozen snow. "He's offered ten ponies. Says if I won't agree he'll take her anyhow. Best I can do is leave him think mebbe I'll accept his offer in the mornin'. Between now'n' sunup we'll have to figure a way out."

Ma nodded. Cactus said some more to the Utes, and still licking their greasy fingers they slithered out.

"We're between a rock and a hard place," I declared, when Cactus had closed and bolted the door behind them; and I hardly recognized my own voice. It sounded like it had come from down a mine shaft. So I didn't say any more, just hunkered down and stared at the floor, thinking. We're twenty miles from our nearest neighbor, the 21 Outfit, and even had their menfolks known of our fix there weren't enough of them to help us much. I thought of trying to sneak a horse out and splitting the breeze for Moorcroft, where the railroad comes nearest our place. But that's thirty miles, and even if I had the agent wire Pa at the Windsor Hotel in Sheridan, Pa would have to wait for a train to Moorcraft, then get his pony from the livery where he'd left it, and come galloping. He couldn't make it in time.

LOOKING scared as a rabbit in a coyote's mouth, Lyda came cat-footing back to the kitchen. "Which way did Wilse go and what time did he start?" I asked her, thinking that with a led horse packing his bedroll he'd travel slow and I might overtake him.

She hitched at the waistband of the pants she'd put on, and I saw they were mine, the brown wool ones I'd got for Christmas. She had on my boots, too; and green flannel shirt. I didn't mind, though. Right then Lyda could have had my right arm.

"I haven't the slightest idea," she said shakily, watching Ma yank down the window shades.

"Mad or not, Wilse would come back if he knew," Ma declared. "He's got more sand than the Belle Fourche River. But one more man—even your pa, who's not due home till tomorrow evening—couldn't handle this mob of heathen. Cactus has done all a body can do short of killing that miserable Waro, and a killing would only make a bad matter worse."

"That's right," Cactus agreed, levering a load into the rifle. "Now here's what I'd suggest: Lyda, you pile that doggone yaller hair into this ol' hat o' mine and yank it clean to your ears. Put on yer pa's ol' coat, there, then you'n Ira chump right out to the barn same as if 'twas me'n him goin' to see a sick mare. Slap saddles on Snip an' Whimpy. They're in the corral. They ain't been rode recent and are fresh, and they're both fast. Go out through the horse pasture and leave the gate open so them Ute ponies can drift out too. You'n Ira high-tail fer the 21 headquarters—"

"And leave Ma here to catch what-for when they find I'm gone?" Lyda cut in. "I should say not! Would you come, Ma?"

Ma shook her head. "I haven't ridden since I was a girl and would only be a drag. Anyhow, your father and I worked too long and hard on this place for me to let these Indians wreck it and run off the stock. As for you and Ira going, I'd insist on it if I really thought you'd get away, but I somehow don't."

"We'll all stay together," Lyda said with that square-jawed look she gets when balky. "We've got guns. If we can't bluff them we'll fight, and—"

"Well, we'll do the best we kin," Cactus sighed, chunking more cottonwood into the stove because the October night was getting crimpy. "You women may's well turn in, but don't shuck yer clothes, and make sure the windows is fast. Me'n Ira will keep watch."

For a wonder, Ma didn't object to my staying up. She just marched Lyda into the bedroom with her and shut the door. Then it was quiet, save for the snarling and sniffing of the Ute dogs as they snooped around the yard. I sure felt cornered, and sat staring at a place on the floor where one of the Utes had spit. I'd have been willing to make a run for it to save Lyda, like Cactus had suggested, but like her I didn't want to leave Ma to deal with the Indians and try to protect our things. I sure wished I could get by cornet outside and hide it.

Then I thought of something even worse than losing the cornet. It hadn't rained since Noah. The house was dry as hot ashes. Come sunrise and a showdown, the Utes could burn us out. My stomach got uneasy as though I'd been alkalied. "Cactus," I said, "we can't just sit here like trapped rabbits. We've got to do something."

"What?" Cactus scowled. "This here is a

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difficulty I'd be teetotal glad to see a way out of it."

"The best way out of a difficulty is through it," I said, feeling wise as a treeful or owls. "Pa is always saying that, and he's licked more troubles than could be packed into a chuck-wagon. Now listen,—"

For maybe half an hour Cactus and I made medicine. Then, after I'd got matches, and my cornet in its green cloth case, he doused the lamp and unlocked the door. I slipped out. It wanted a quarter of ten.

Flat as a wet leaf against the house I sidled along its back wall. An owl hooted, but it sounded faked. The house was being watched. My hair stood on end like the quills of a vexed porcupine.

As a dog snarled nearby I tucked the cornet under my arm and left out for the open country, twisting and dodging amidst the tipis like a snaky calf. I ducked through a fence and headed for one of the stacks of wild hay Pa had hauled in for winter feed. It was quite a piece from the house and across a coulee, but I finally made it, blowing like an old work-horse that's run a mile.

After some of the scare had worked out of me I looked into several conditions Cactus had mentioned. While a quarter moon hung with one horn hooked over the skyline, low clouds had moved in overhead. That was good. What little wind there was came from the east, and I was west of the house. That was good too. And that piece of range was grazed off, and the ground around the haystack had been tromped bare as a dry-farmer's feed-lot by antelope trying to eat on the stack which Pa had fenced. It didn't take me long to fire the hay on the windward side and pull foot.

Quick as powder the dogs set up a ruckus, and there was a racket among the tipis. Behind a clump of sagebrush at the edge of a draw, I stopped to watch. The stack was going great guns now, throwing a red glare up against the clouds. Unless the wind switched soon our buildings were in no danger, and there wasn't much chance of the chewed-down range grass catching. I knew that Ma would be up and asking Cactus where I was.

Finally the dogs and Indians quieted and the flames died. It was dark again, and cold, and I suddenly felt forlorn as a motherless calf.

Still hugging my horn I followed the draw till I was a quarter-mile south of the house, then settled down to wait. The moon was gone. I had no idea of the time. I worried that Cactus might doze off and let something happen. The night dragged on slow as a snail climbing a slick log.

At last, when I'd shivered till I ached, I saw the buttes were beginning to show hard and black against the eastern sky. My heart began to pound and I chewed my lips, and paced up and down like a caged fox.

WHEN the first trace of red burned through the gray, and the sun was finally coming, I put the cornet to my mouth and let go with a bugle call. I didn't do it well, and don't know if it was *First Call* or *Reveille,* but it worked.

The Indians set up a clatter again, and by climbing the slope I could see—greenish daylight was coming fast now—that they were scurrying around like red ants piling out of a burning log. Teepees were being yanked down, everybody and the dogs were gabbling, and even the lazy bucks were catching up ponies and helping pack. I let go another call. It was like roweling a loping horse into a dead run.

Just in case they got careless and collected some of our Circle S ponies along with the smaller things they'd already swiped, I cached the cornet under a bush and started for the house. And I guess Cactus had the same idea for, carrying the rifle in the crook of his arm, he bulged out the door.

Bet that Waro has forgot all about Lyda, I thought, hurrying along. *Or at least he's too scared—*

But I was wrong. Of a sudden I saw him bob up between Cactus and the open back door. Starting to run I yelled, but in the uproar my voice was lost like a whisper in a big wind. I saw Ma block Waro in the doorway. She had the pistol and he stopped, arms hanging, head forward, shoulders hunched, like a bear on its hind legs.

"Shoot, Ma!" I screeched, scared that being squeamish she'd wait too long.

But Ma didn't need to shoot. Someone else did, and a splinter flew from the stoop at Waro's feet. He jumped like a deer that's backed into a thorn bush, and almost before he'd turned to run, Wilse Baxter parted his hair with a gun barrel.

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As the Ute went down like a dropped rope, Wilse swung off a fagged-out roan. Having stepped over Waro, Ma and Lyda were chattering and pawing at Wilse, and he got an arm around each of them.

"I'd stopped at the Half Circle Bar for the night and turned in early," he was telling them as Cactus and I got there together. "Somewhere after ten o'clock, one of the boys came into the bunkhouse and mentioned a light in the sky over this way. I took a look, borrowed a fresh pony and started back. All night I've been worriec as a bullfrog waitin' for rain, and when I saw these Indians—"

"Why, here's Norton!" Ma cried, pulling free of Wilse; and dogged if Pa wasn't there, his face tight and white as a drumhead.

"Great snakes! You're all right, I see!" he panted, all but falling out of his saddle to grab Ma. " 'Bout sundown yesterday I heard in Sheridan that these Utes were on the loose. Bein' lucky I caught an eastbound freight, got to Moorcroft 'bout ten, and had just saddled up to start for here when a light flared against the clouds and I thought—Doggone, I was afraid—" His voice broke.

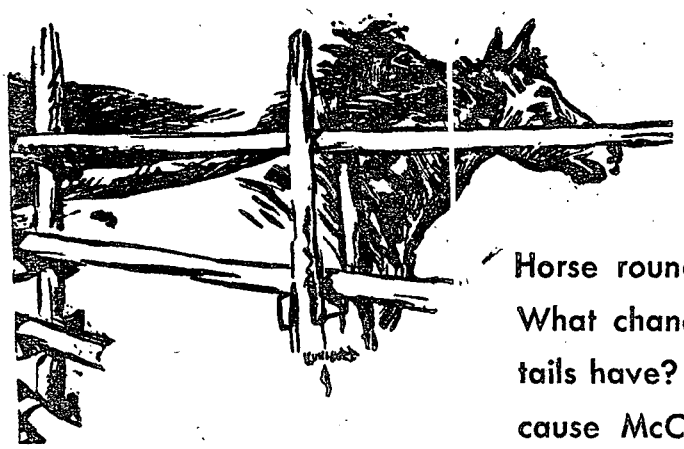
Wilse was winking kind of fast, too. "Cavalry must a-been follerin, these Utes pretty tight," he said, looking around. "I heard a bugle."

"There's yer calvary," Cactus chuckled, jerking his head toward me as he stood ready to douse Waro with a pail of water. "Him and that cornet sure throwed a scare into these skedaddlin' flyblown—"

Whosh! went the water. Waro sat up, scrambled to his feet, and didn't look back one time as he hauled out just an inch ahead of Pa's boot toe.

"We didn't see how we was a-goin' to work out o' that jackpot," Cactus went on. "But Ira's got imagination. He sent up that smoke, too, figgerin' to fetch him back a brother-in-law. And I guess he done so."

Not knowing that Wilse had been away, Pa was puzzled but let it pass. He was looking at me. They all were, and there was something in Pa's tired eyes I couldn't put a name to. "The best way out is through, eh, son?" he said.



Horse roundup with a plane! What chance did the broomtails have? Perhaps it was because McCord knew what it was to be the quarry himself that roused his sympathies. . . . .

"The Hunted"

by DEE LINFORD—in our next issue

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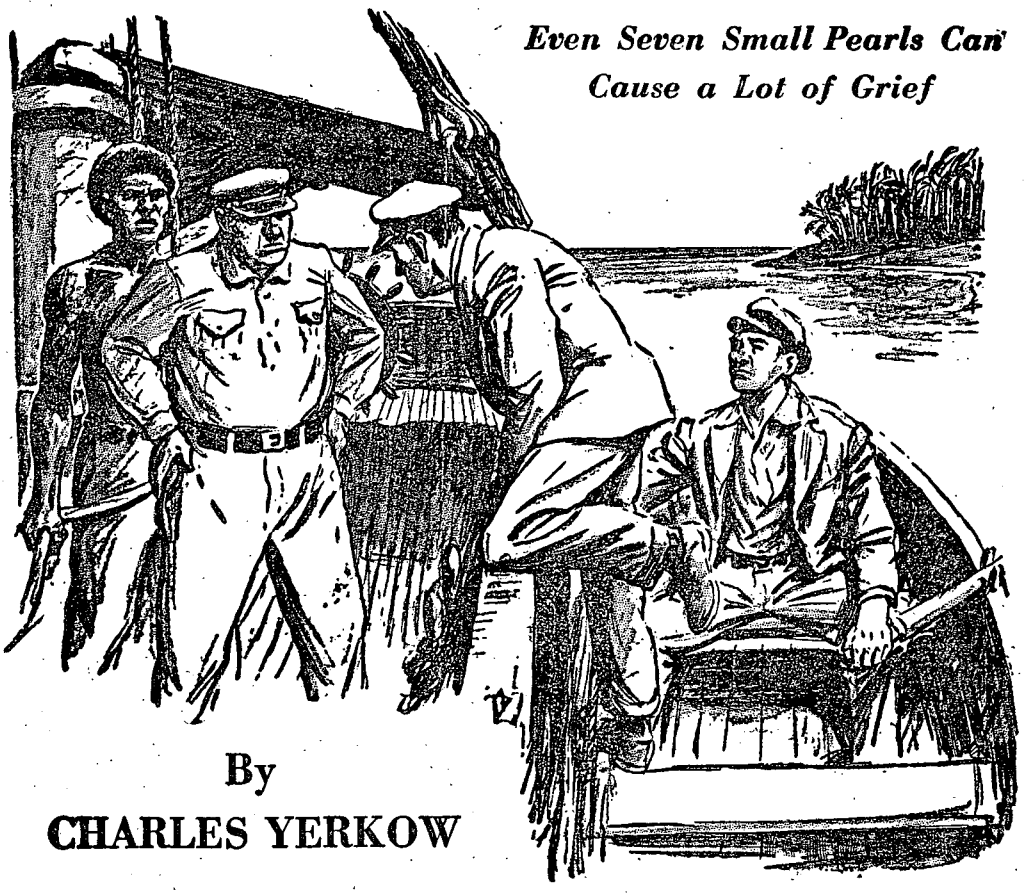
Even Seven Small Pearls Can Cause a Lot of Grief



By
CHARLES YERKOW

PEARLS AND TROUBLE

HIS elbows propped on the warped rail of his anchored pearling lugger, Orni Buckson scowled angrily at the sun-parched cluster of small islands and the sea-washed reefs of Leki in the Arafura Sea. The islands were uninhabited. The screaming birds were the only life in the air while an occasional fin showed the path of a cruising shark.

For two monotonous weeks Orni had fished these beds, which lay north of Taminig and Niga. The shell had been good, but the seven small pearls had been little larger than seed but of a lustrous sheen and quite round. He knew Ling Jong, the elderly Chinese trader and pearl buyer back on Taminig, would not have cared much for those pearls, but that was now secondary consideration to the old pearler. The pearls had been stolen, and he had made up his mind to clear up the mystery. Someone had boarded them through the night, had crept below into the cabin and had taken the pouch with the pearls, and now, in the morning, there was no sign of a ship or longboat at which to point an accusing finger.

Billy Crusse, the young mate, and Megu, the native *tul-tul* in charge of the four Soholi boys, leaned lazily against the port rail and kept their eyes on the old pearler.

"By-an'-by," Megu said, "Cap'n Buckson catch brain bird and we know who thief."

The young mate glanced toward the skipper. "I hope his brain bird doesn't make him do something foolish."

The native showed his white teeth in a wide grin. "Cap'n Buckson never foolish."

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Billy shook his head skeptically but did not reply.

Orni meantime stood thinking about his problem. He couldn't see why anyone'd steal pearls which were no better than seed stuff. He watched the dorsal fin of a basking shark circling near the stern. His mind refused to function, refused to think of any clue which would tell him why a thief would want pearls of no value. Another dorsal fin appeared and followed the first one for a few turns, then both sharks sounded out of sight.

Orni turned around to face the deck. He pushed the peaked cap off his forehead and peered under the cracked visor at Billy and Megu.

"Billy," he called quietly.

Billy sauntered over. "What did you figure out, Pop?"

"Don't call me Pop," Orni snapped, "and pay attention to what I've got to tell you." He slowly stroked the four day's growth of beard then ran his stubby fingers through the graying hair back of his ear. "This whole business," he said dourly, "seems to me to be a ruse of some sort. The thief stole our pearls; he knew I'd not have them locked in the strong box, unless they were big babies to pop your eyes—which means he knows the ways of pearlers in these waters."

Orni pursed his lips, paused and his gaze fell on the piles of shell on the forward deck. "Our thief," he went on, "is trying to do one of two things. He's trying to scare us off, or he's trying to get us to weigh anchor and scoot around these islands in search of him. That's the best I can figure, Billy."

The mate shifted his weight to the other foot. "Maybe he'll show up tonight. How about ambushing him?"

Orni shook his head. "He won't be back tonight."

"How do you know?"

ORNI waved his hand impatiently. Billy was a good mate and a good diver, but what he didn't know about shrewd crooks in the Arafura could fill a lot of holds. "He, or they," he said ruefully, "won't return tonight—because it's what you'd expect them to do."

Billy shrugged indifferently. "The pearls don't mean too much, skipper. Maybe some native came alongside in his dugout, maybe some beachcomber." He grinned. "I know what. Let's sail around all the Strait islands, along all of the New Guinea and Australia coastline and ask every shipmaster if he was around us last night. I'm sure we'll—"

"We'll find nothing," Orni cut in, "and you're acting like a silly booby bird." He became thoughtful for a moment. "The first thing to do is pick out our man—pick out one person who'd have reason to want us stopped—and then place the crime into his lap."

"That's easy," Billy said readily. "Captain Gray ought to be our man."

Orni exhaled. "Now you're using your head."

The mate frowned. "I was only kidding, Pop."

"I'm not! Gray is the one man who'd want to squeeze in on any pearl beds we find. With the District Officer Doughan away on his monthly patrol to Kotir, Gray is liable to try a trick of this kind."

Billy sighed, but he knew better than to argue with Orni. "You don't really think Captain Gray trailed us here and—"

"Of course not! But nothing'd stop him from sending somebody else."

Billy made a face, said, "No one on Taminig has a ship to—" Then he knotted his brows. "The new men in the east anchorage! Sure thing, Captain Taner, his mate Straps, and that little shrimp —"

"His name's Weasel," Orni said dryly.

Billy now seemed seriously interested. "I get it. Gray is our competitor. He wants us to quit the beds here, so he gets Taner and his men to scare us off. If we scoot around looking for the thieves, Gray could let his own ships take over."

Orni smiled. "We're only guessing. As I figure it, whoever is playing this game has to get back to Gray and report to him. We can't know whether Gray is around here or back on Taminig. I'm willing to get back to Taminig and see, and if Gray isn't there I aim to get back here and fight it out with him." Straightening, Orni hooked his thumbs into his wide belt. "Well, is that the way you'd do it?"

"Sure thing, Pop. Back to Taminig." He

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motioned at the strip of land off their starboard. "What about the lean-to and the shell that's still on the island?"

"It'll keep," Orni said. "Our first job is to find the thief and make his say 'Aye, I'm the guilty one, and it was Gray who put me up to it.' And that, Billy lad, will take a heap o' doing." He started walking aft, and his mate fell in step.

"When we prove Gray responsible," Billy said, "how about letting me punch him in the eye?"

Orni looked shocked. "Billy, that's not proper conduct for a former first officer in the U. S. Navy. However, I know your sentiment in the matter and I'll gladly relieve you of the task."

They were among the idle Soholi boys now, and the old pearler gave Megu a joking push.

"Step lively! We're getting outta here! Show me you're better sailor boys than those on Cap'n Gray's ships!"

The Soholis chattered happily and fell to. Megu started a chant, and soon the sail caught the breeze and the bow swung toward Taminig Island to the south.

IN THE early afternoon of the following day they passed Niga Island, keeping the reef wall on their starboard. Billy asked the still-thoughtful skipper how he wanted to go in, and Orni replied that he wanted to look over Captain Taner's schooner in the east anchorage. The old pearler went below, and when he came up on deck again he had his long pearling knife stuck in his belt and the 16-power binoculars hung around his neck.

"You look all decked out for a fight," Billy observed.

Orni shook his head. "I'm too old to fight, Billy lad. I'm just using a bit o' psychology." He squinted across the bow. "Get us near the Point Passage so I can see if Gray's ships are all here."

Billy sent the squat lugger smartly along the reef wall.

"All here," Orni mumbled as he counted the ships at their moorings.

Now Billy veered toward the east anchorage and the lone schooner, while Orni propped his elbows on the rail and twirled the knob to focus the glasses.

"Hey, Pop," Billy smiled teasingly. "You're on the wrong side if you want to see Taner's ship."

The old pearler didn't bother turning around. "When you put about I'll be all right. Take us in close."

Billy sighed. "You mean back to the passage?"

"The devil no!" Orni exclaimed, motioning at the crew boys and Megu standing by the lines. "Get us through the Point. Give these lazy boys something to do, and show Taner and his scum you can handle a ship! Now look lively!"

Billy pulled his mouth to one side, then resignedly hitched his belt tighter. "Megu!" he called.

"Ai!" came the grinning answer.

"Get in the bow! We're going in between the islands!"

Magu's grin vanished, and in the next instant, collecting his wits, he started shouting at the boys. They jumped to.

"Ollo set!" Megu called from the bow. Then he put his eyes on the sea ahead and began watching for reefs and the bar.

Orni watched them proudly. Aye, Billy had done a good job training these willing natives, and Megu was capably carrying through. Orni then balanced himself against the lazy roll of the ship, lifted the glasses and waited for the right range. As Billy brought the lugger about and headed for the treacherous narrows. Orni centered the glasses on the aft deck of the big schooner. He saw two white men and recognnized them as Captain Taner and the little Weasel. They were leaning on the rail and watching his lugger but straightened suddenly when they realized the true intentions of the ship. The nearer Billy brought her to the gap, the more the men began talking and grinning. They were sure they'd see the lugger perched atop the bar or even before—on the reefs. They were from Australia, but they knew their charts; What they didn't know was that the old pearler knew exactly how much water his ship drew without the pearlshell which had been left at Leki.

ORNI scanned the rest of the deck, saw the burly mate Straps directing the native crew around the improvised awning.

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They had evidently anchored only a short while before.

As Billy and Megu exchanged shouts and the lugger rushed through the narrow gap, Orni saw Captain Taner turn around and say something to the mate.

"I wonder what they'll be up to now," Orni mulled half-aloud as he walked aft to the wheel and gave Billy a hard pat on the back. "Well done, Billy. Our guess was mightly close, for I make it they came in not too long ago, and from the look on their faces I think they're surprised to see us."

"What now?" Billy asked.

"I don't know." Orni glanced again at the schooner. "Have Megu and the boys stay on board. I'd like to talk to Ling Jong. His house is on this side, and he should've seen the schooner sail and make Taminig again today. I'll need that kind of testimony for Doughan. And then I'm going up to see Gray."

"That sounds like lot of talk-talk," Billy said, imitating the pidgin talk of the natives.

"It's necessary," Orni snapped. He took the wheel, smiled. "One thing we'll do in the talk-talk. We'll make them think we got good pearls in the strong box."

The young mate shook his head skeptically. "It doesn't make sense."

"It might," Orni remarked, "as we go along." He brought the lugger about, then watched the crew working—Billy helping them make fast the lines, mooring, and then the ship swung with the current. Megu took down the tarpaulin and covered the shell on deck, while Billy and the boys erected the awning. Orni gave Megu the glasses to take below, ordered the longboat readied. While all this was being carried out he glanced ruefully at the District Officer's house, then at the beach and the landing where Doughan's launch was usually tied up. Doughan and the launch were now somewhere at Mereka, Orni told himself, and it meant he'd have to proceed cautiously in his plan to uncover the real thieves—and see that they were punished without the interference of the official red-taped investigation.

It was a big order, Orni admitted to himself.

Orni instructed Megu and the boys to remain on board and not let anyone on deck, particularly not Taner's or Gray's men. He and Billy then clambered down into the longboat and made for the beach, where they hauled the boat high, and then walked slowly past the government house and across No Hurry Creek bridge toward Tobe's pub.

"You go on in," Orni said to Billy. "Spend some time with Tobe, and be sure to tell him that we've had good luck. I'll tell him the truth myself later, but I want the word to get around—just in case it fails to get to Taner or Gray any other way. Keep your eyes open. You can see Gray's house through Tobe's backroom, and I figure Taner and Gray ought to be meeting there."

"Where're you going?"

"I'll be at Ling Jong's." He started walking away, then turned around. "And remember. No fighting—until I give the word."

Billy half saluted that he understood.

Orni went on—past the Cingalese's house and down the pathway toward Ling Jong's thatch-roofed building behind the knoll.

He didn't often visit the elderly Chinese, not since Jong had decided to be a full-time buyer and pearl trader and had left the foods and lodgings business to Tobe—but Orni's recollection of oriental surroundings was the same now as in the past. The semi-darkness of drawn shades, accented weirdly by the soft tinkle of bells somewhere in the house and the pleasing aroma of violet incense silently burning.

Orni paused on the veranda and peered into the big room. He knew his presence was known. Jong lived here with one man, Wa, and the only family member was his daughter Flower, who had come from Sydney for a visit. He had never before met the girl, but now smiled as he recalled Billy telling him excitedly how beautiful Flower looked.

"Ho!" Orni called out. Then he dropped into the wicker chair and waited patiently.

Without a sound, Wa appeared. "Mastah come pletty soon," he said and bowed politely.

Orni grunted at the formality. All he wanted from Jong was one answer to one question.

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Wa disappeared.

Orni's patience was just about growing short, when Ling Jong padded out, his silken robe shining in the bright light, his arms folded idly across his chest.

Orni had to submit to the usual long exchange of greetings, and after that was over he inquired for Jong's and Flower's health, and asked how business was. At last Jong shifted to the immediate issue.

"You bring perhaps good pearls for sale?" he asked.

"I've some on board," Orni lied, "but that's not why I came."

Jong's brow lifted. "So?"

Orni pointed his short stubby finger at the big schooner. "You could be a big help, Jong, if you'll tell me what I want to know."

"Will try," Jong said blandly.

Orni was still looking at the schooner, but now his gaze fell on the longboat by the landing used in the east anchorage. "So they came ashore," he mumbled to himself.

Ling Jong heard him, and nodded. "Ah, yes. Mister Straps and Mister Weasel. They go up to the storage sheds. Perhaps intend to buy goods or —"

"Goods nothing!" Orni said crossly. He stood up. He knew Billy was keeping an eye on Gray's house, but now curiosity ate at the old pearler—he wanted to know what Gray and these crooks would talk about. He was forced to dismiss the thoughts from his mind, for the only way he could find out was by going to Gray's place and listening in. It wouldn't be easy—and yet he wanted Gray to know that they weren't as smart as they thought. Turning to Jong, he said, "I want you to help me, Jong, with Doughan. I know Taner's ship left here a few days ago, followed me, and then returned to Taminig. I might need that kind of evidence for Doughan when I press charges against Gray." He leaned forward and hooked his thumbs into his belt, but before he could get an answer from the Chinese, the sound of light footsteps behind him caused both men to turn.

The prettiest Chinese girl Orni'd ever seen stood before him. Her black hair was up in American style, but she wore an embroidered kimono with long sleeves which hid her hands.

"You must be Captain Buckson," she said. "Father mentioned you many times in his letters. I'm most happy to meet you." She smiled.

Orni gulped, said, "You're a right trim little—" He checked himself. "Aye, I've heard as much about you, and so did my mate Billy."

He wished now he'd come to call on Jong sooner.

Flower said, "Oh? But you never called." Then she looked at her father. "I hope you are not angry because I came out."

ORNI noticed Jong's face quiver once, very lightly, as if a painful thought had crossed his mind. But now he was again composed, bland expression, soft voice. "It is all right, Flower. You may leave us to discuss our business."

The girl gave Orni another quick glance. "Tell Billy 'Hello' for me, Captain Buckson."

"I'll do that." When she was gone, Orni looked at Jong. "Now where were we? Aye —about Taner following me. Tell me, have you seen his ship leave? And when did he return?"

But Ling Jong seemed to hesitate. The silence became awkward. At last he said, "Cap'n Buckson, I do not sit here watching the sea for ships."

Orni's brow knotted and he took a deep breath. "Watch the sea! That's a fine answer!" Clearing his throat, he slapped his right fist into the palm of his left hand and started pacing the veranda. He understood the Chinese perfectly. Ling Jong would not tell him what he wanted to know. He would say he couldn't remember, he would say anything—but he would not tell him the truth. Orni couldn't figure out why, but he knew better than to press Jong.

"Look here," he said, fighting to keep his temper in check, "I happen to know Taner wasn't anchored here all the time. My friend Tobe can't see the east anchorage, otherwise I'd get real friends to help me out. Mind what I said! Real friends!"

"I am most humble servant and most true friend," the Chinese intoned sadly. "But you are asking the impossible."

"In a shark's fin!" the old pearler shot back.

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"You ask me to tell you the impossible," Jong repeated.

"Ha! Impossible! Is it because Gray promised to sell you every pearl he fished? Special deal? You're getting to be like the other traders around here!" He turned his back and took the first step off the veranda. "I'm through with you!"

Orni started walking up the path, not heeding the shrill voice of Ling Jong calling to him to come back for a cup of wine to wash away the ill feeling. He could hear him calling even when he reached the grove, but he went on toward Tobe's pub.

Calling to the big pub owner to bring a glass of ale, Orni told Billy what had happened. The young mate listened attentively. When Tobe came over to light the kerosene lamp and then placed the tall sweating glass before the skipper, the conversation between the two died out. Tobe nudged Orni, said, "What you up to, you old coot? Maybe I can help you out—"

"You can," Orni snapped irritably. "Leave us alone!"

"My," Tobe jeered and smiled, "ain't you the touchy one! I saw you on your way to Jong's. Anything wrong? He refuse to bid high enough for your big pearls?"

"Shut up, Tobe, and mind your own business."

Tobe shrugged, left them in a huddle.

"See Taner?" Orni asked in a whisper, turning to his mate.

Billy shook his head. "But I saw Straps and Weasel go straight to Gray's place."

"That proves Gray's in with them."

"You look worried," Billy remarked.

Orni sipped his ale. "Ling Jong acted strangely. Refused to cooperate with me. A simple question like—"

"Now stop getting hot."

Orni took a long drink, put the glass down. "I've got to figure this out, Billy." Wrapping his calloused hand around the cold glass, he hunched over the table and squinted into the dark corner.

A half hour passed but he got nowhere in trying to figure out Jong's refusal to testify against Taner and Gray. After another glass of ale and another half hour of fruitless thought, he ran his hand over his wrinkled brow and admitted he was licked.

Then the screen door banged and Flower stood in the pub, looking to the men like a dream vision appearing out of the night.

Orni closed his eyes, opened them. "Well, I'll be a—" He glanced at his mate next to him, said, "Close your mouth, Billy." Then he took off his cap and stood up.

But Tobe had also seen the girl enter, and he came on the run and took a wide stance before her, blocking the entrance into the big room. "Go away, Miss Flower," he pleaded. "I don't want no trouble with Doughan. If he finds out you were—"

Orni pushed Tobe aside. "Doughan needn't find out anything." Then to the girl, "You wanted to see me, or"—he paused—"Billy?"

"It's very important, Captain Buckson," the girl said quickly. "If we could talk for a little while—"

Orni put on his best manners as he held the door open and ushered the girl out into the open.

Tobe looked at Billy when the door closed. "If Ling Jong ever saw this he'd howl like a hornbill."

Billy closed his mouth but his eyes remained on the door. "Isn't she pretty?"

Tobe said "Bah" and went at his glass cleaning. "Good thing none of them traders were here."

Outside, Orni stood squinting at Flower and sniffing the closeness of her violet-scented robe.

She spoke in a whisper, and all the time kept turning her head from side to side as if afraid of being seen. Orni promised not to ever tell Ling Jong of this meeting—"And you have my word that Billy and Tobe will keep their big mouths—I mean, they'll not mention they saw you." He led her to the black shadows at the side of the pub. "Now tell me what the trouble is."

"They told Father they'll hurt me," Flower said suddenly.

"Ah! They did, did they? What for, and who are they? Captain Gray, no doubt?"

In the darkness he saw the girl shake her head in the negative. "No, not Captain Gray. Two men came. The little one is called Weasel, and the big one is Mister Straps. They talked with Father the longest time. I overheard from my room. It was about Captain Taner's ship, but I

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couldn't understand everything. They wanted Father to tell everybody that they were here at Taming all the time. I know they sailed away day before yesterday and returned before dawn today, but I just don't know what it means. Why should they tell Father that they'll hurt—"

"I know what it means," Orni drawled. "And which goon said he'd hurt you?"

"They both said so. They told Father to do as they said, or that they would beat my face in."

Orni growled. "The dirty, no good—" Then he sighed. "What else?

"When you came this afternoon, I listened again from my room. I'm not afraid of those men, but Father is afraid for me."

Orni stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I understand, Miss Flower," he said. "So Jong was shielding you. But he should've told me."

"I wanted you to know, so you wouldn't be angry with Father."

"I'm no longer angry," the old pearler drawled softly. "Now you wait here and I'll have Billy walk you back to the house."

Flower smiled, though the old pearler couldn't see it.

He ducked into the pub. The girl stepped closer to the door to hear what they'd say.

"Billy," Orni called to his mate, "I want you to take Miss Flower home, then come back here."

"Why don't you take her home?" Billy asked.

Flower smiled again as she listened.

"Now don't act silly," came Orni's voice. "Just walk her home. What's the matter? Afraid? She's a right nice girl."

"I know she's nice, and I'm not afraid. Where're you going?"

"To Gray's, for an unfriendly chat. Stop changing what I'm talking about! And stop keeping the girl waiting out there!"

"Look, Pop. If Ling Jong catches me—"

"I'll bet you he won't," Orni snapped. "Holy spinakers! You're plumb scared o' the girl!"

"I know what. Let's both walk her home."

Flower pouted at this suggestion.

Orni didn't reply, and the pause weighed heavy in the silence. Flower edged closer to the door. Then she heard Billy say, "Okay, Pop; you win. I'll meet you back here."

Flower smiled and quickly touched her hair and robe to make sure she looked her best.

Billy emerged and peered around at the jungle blackness. "Hey. Where are you?"

"Hello, Billy."

"Hello. Come on. I'm supposed to take you home." He started walking, and Flower, with a little frown furrowing her pretty brow, walked behind him.

Orni meantime went out the back way and headed up the path on his way toward Gray's place.

WHEN Orni stomped onto Gray's veranda the three men in the room turned suddenly to face the doorway. Orni stepped into the room and looked at his enemies.

Captain Gray, in white ducks and coat, tried to appear as if he'd just transacted a business deal; his eyes, surprised, glanced furtively at the old pearler, but he remained seated.

The towering mate Straps pulled his mouth to one side and then slowly stuck his hands into his hip pockets and stood up.

The small man in striped jumper and sun helmet smiled automatically and then scratched his upper lip as he walked around the table so as to have the big mate between himself and Orni.

"What brings you?" Gray asked coldly.

Orni Buckson scowled and approached the table. Placing his hands on the back of the chair and leaning toward his competitor, he said, "Gray, you're a dirty rat. You're in with these thieves. You had them follow me to Leki, and you had them steal my pearls."

Neither Gray nor the others said anything.

Orni went on. "Captain Taner at least has enough brains to keep out of this—he's leaving all the dirty work to his mate and this—this Weasel." He pointed his finger at Gray. "But you're the worst of them all! You're a dirty rat!"

Everybody remained silent, watching him. Straps at last glanced quickly at Gray, then back at the pudgy pearler.

"Ha!" Orni exclaimed. "You're even too yellow to deny it!"

Now Gray began drumming his fingers

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against the table. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said irritably.

"You know damned well. You sent these crooks. Told 'em to rob me. You figured I'd scoot around the reefs looking for them, while they reported to you and you could take your sweet time getting to the Leki beds, to my beds!" Orni straightened and grinned. "Well, you and your punk pals are dumber than I thought. You got the pearls, sure, but you got the worst o' the lot. I've the big ones, four o' them, locked safely in my strong box." He strutted past Straps. "Get that through your thick skull! Four big pearls. And I doubt there's another good pearl left at Leki."

He walked out then, and nobody tried to stop him.

Straps winked at Weasel, and they both bent close to Gray and started whispering.

Orni angrily kicked his heels against the ground as he walked down the path leading toward the grove and Tobe's pub. He wondered if his lie would cause Gray and the others to react as he hoped. Would they be arrogant enough to attempt boarding his ship? If they did, he and his boys would fix them good, and when he once had them on board it'd be definite proof to Doughan that they were the culprits. Would Weasel and Straps try it alone, or would Gray be in on it too? What about Taner—was he cleverly keeping out of trouble or was he the kind of man who'd risk showing his face in an attempted theft?

Time alone would tell, but what gnawed at Orni's brain was the fact that time was short. If Straps and Weasel boarded him through the night, how would he get Doughan back from Mereka to make the official arrest? He couldn't hold the mate by himself, and the whole mess would get out of hand. And then again, the old pearler didn't really like too well the thought of Doughan's handling the case—that would involve charges brought by him, Orni, against Gray and Taner's men, proof that they were the thieves, proof that Gray instigated the entire business. The closer Orni came to the grove the more convinced he became that he ought to handle the entire case his own way. Aye, he could easily solve this, he reasoned, if given enough time, and if he figured the reaction of his enemies the right way.

He was guiding himself through the darkness by the slivers of light in Tobe's back room and the bright square from Sepi's house on his right side. The Cingalese pearl peeler must be up late, Orni thought, working on someone's pearls. Out at sea his own lugger, and Gray's, had put up their lanterns for the night, and their flickering flames bobbed from side to side like playing fireflies.

Orni was nearing the creek bridge when he heard the sound of padding feet. For the moment he thought some natives were on their way back to the *kampong* the other side of No Hurry Creek, but, not hearing the usual chatter, Orni came to a halt and listened.

The grove was behind him, the bridge to his left. With his eyes fastened on the lighted window of Sepi's house, Orni waited.

Whoever was on the path didn't know his directions and didn't know how to move through the grove without making noise.

Orni held his breath. The footsteps came nearer, to his right. He saw two figures go past, one wearing a peaked cap and the other with a sun helmet.

Orni's first thought was to follow Straps and Weasel. They were heading toward the beach, that much he could guess, but he had expected them to attack him, since they knew he was alone on the path. They should've forced him at gun point to take them aboard and give them the big pearls which he didn't have.

Orni started walking stealthily around the grove, but in the same instant his ears caught another sound. This time the footsteps came from behind him on the path. He came to a stop.

Captain Gray's voice called out. "Hey, Buckson! That you?"

Orni scowled. He had been standing still, and yet Gray pretended to have seen or heard him.

"I'm here," the old pearler said hoarsely. "Your eyesight amazes me."

"I was hoping I'd catch you before you reached Tobe's."

"Why?"

"I've something to tell you."

Gray was now near enough, though in the blackness the white duck coat barely showed him to Orni. "Talk fast," Orni said.

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"I've got to meet Billy." His thoughts jumped to Straps and Weasel hurrying to the beach. He knew there was a chance they'd try taking his longboat to get to the lugger and the pearls. And here Gray was trying to hold him in a conversation. Something was up—that much he was sure of.

Captain Gray was taking his time. "Look here, Buckson," he was saying. "You come to my place and make all sorts of accusations."

"So?"

"I don't like it."

"That's too bad."

"I'm going to press charges against you."

"Go right ahead." With that Orni took a few steps as if to walk away.

"Wait."

Orni sighed. He had expected this, and he didn't think it was being handled very cleverly by Gray. Wheeling angrily on his competitor, he shouted, "What's the big idea trying to keep me here while your punks are up to some trickery? Now outta my way or I'll—"

He turned his back to walk on. Gray reached out and grabbed his arm. "You accused me of having your pearls."

The one thing he shouldn't have done was grab the old pearler's arm.

Orni said, "You struck me, Gray." In the same instant he caught his competitor's wrist and gave it a hard tug. Gray lost his balance and sort of bowed forward, at which point Orni let go of him. Gray straightened, and promptly lost his balance in the backward direction. Then Orni gave him a push.

Gray staggered as far as No Hurry Creek and toppled over.

The loud splash brought a smile to Orni's seamed leathery face; without listening to Gray's cursing and threats, the old pearler hurried on toward the beach.

As he neared the pub, he heard hard thudding sounds, the shuffle of feet, the crack of a fist against soft flesh and then the harder crack against the jaw.

Orni gave himself one guess. Billy had come upon Straps and Weasel trying to steal the longboat.

Orni raced across the bridge and down the path. He let out a *whoop!* and panted on to the aid of his young mate.

"Hold on, Billy! he shouted.

But upon reaching the struggling shapes he came to a stop and tried to figure out which man to strike at. The little one was Weasel, but the other two looked alike.

"Keep clear, Pop," he heard Billy pant.

Orni lunged for Weasel. The little man ducked to the side, tripped and fell. Before Orni could pounce on him Straps and Billy shuffled around and fell across Weasel. All that Orni could do was put his hands on his hips and wait for them to untangle. When they did, first Weasel and then Straps made for the path and were lost in the blackness.

"Are you hurt, Billy?" Orni asked.

Billy slapped his peaked cap against his thigh to shake the sand out, said, "Naw. Wish I'd have hit him harder. They were trying to steal our longboat."

ORNI patted his back. "You're a right tough boy, Billy, but this whole mess needs brains. Now let's walk back to Tobe's and I'll explain what happened, and you can tell me how you and Miss Flower got along."

"She's a nice girl," the mate said quietly.

Orni smiled to himself, then told Billy what happened at Gray's place. Billy listened without saying a word, but when Orni said, "Let's figure this out over a glass of ale at Tobe's," the young mate objected on the grounds that the District Officer ought to handle the entire matter.

"It'll take Doughan too long," Orni snapped. "Now I've an idea—"

"Not another idea, Pop!" Billy groaned.

The skipper grinned. "This is a stroke o' genius. Straps and Weasel won't try boarding our ship tonight anymore. I'm sure of it. But in the morning here's what we'll do. We'll weigh anchor and clear out of Taminig. My guess is that Straps will convince Captain Taner to follow us. They're too pearl-hungry now that I've told them we've some big babies in the strong box."

"So they follow us. What do we do?"

"They're the kind of men who're not afraid to pull a tough trick once we're out at sea. I'm hoping they'll try boarding us. In one way, it'll be evidence I need for Doughan, but in another way I'm hoping to force Taner to do something I'd like to see happen. We'll—"

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"Beat the daylights out of 'em?" Billy asked quietly but hopefully.

Orni shook his head. "No. We'll use our heads. We'll outsmart 'em, that's what we'll do."

Billy scoffed at the idea as he pushed the screen door to the pub open to let Orni in. "I don't call that smart." He followed the skipper to the table, sat down and took off his cap, then ran his hand over his neck. "That guy Straps has a hard fist," he remarked.

"Did he hurt you?"

"Not much. I only hope I caught him where I aimed."

"Forget that," Orni urged. "Here's what we'll do if Taner follows us in the morning." He stroked his chin. "In fact, I've an idea Taner will be in the boarding party once we're out at sea."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I figure he's the only one with some brains and won't trust the work to Weasel. He'll have Straps along, of course."

"Why?"

"In case of a fight." Orni glanced over his shoulder at Tobe, ordered two ales, then leaned across the table and began whispering to his skeptical mate—

WITH the first flush of dawn Orni and Billy rowed the longboat out to the lugger and roused Megu and the boys, and while Billy remained on deck to get the ship under way Orni went below and checked the rifle. When he came topside again he had the glasses slung around his neck.

Billy was just getting them through the Point Passage where, in the morning haze, they could see Gray's moored ships and Taner's lone schooner in the east anchorage. On the deck of Taner's ship some movement was evident.

Orni watched through the powerful binoculars. The big ship remained at anchor as Billy held the lugger close to the reef wall—past Niga Passage and on northward. When they were skirting Niga Island, Orni barely made out the schooner, though, judging from the signs, he thought he saw her change positions in relation to the horizon. That meant she was under way too.

Jackasses," Orni mumbled and lowered

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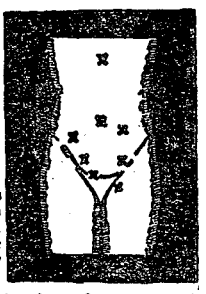

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the glasses. Then he turned to Billy. "Make for the north reefs and anchor."

"Aye, aye."

After anchoring and furling the sails, Orni distributed the wooden clubs among Megu and the boys. "In case of trouble," he explained to the grinning Soholis, "use sticks."

Megu chattered happily and the others joined him. "Me hit-tum hard plenty," Megu boasted in pidging English.

The Soholis repeated after him.

"Mak-kum plenty hot head. Go walk-about no place."

Orni raised one brow. "Well, that'll take care of someone—if they try getting tough."

He had them get a line and make fast to the short crowbar which Billy normally used when diving, and they lowered this over the side.

"Now, Megu," Orni instructed quietly, "you and I will stand here and make believe we're watching out for Billy below. Get two of the boys at the pumps, and you Billy, get out of sight but keep that rifle handy."

In outward appearance, the lugger seemed to be lazily at work pearling.

Captain Taner's schooner hove into sight and made straight for the reefs. Taner didn't even both anchoring, but kept his engine going, holding the ship in the current. The longboat put off, with Taner and Straps.

"All we can do now," Orni said, not too loudly, "is wait for them to board. You all know what you're to do."

The Soholis siddled away, holding the clubs out of sight behind their backs. Billy wiped his sweating hands into his ducks, then took another grip on the rifle.

The longboat came alongside without hailing. Soon Taner and Straps stood on the lugger's deck.

"Don't you punks know better?" Orni asked drily, eyeing the man before him.

Taner arrogantly pushed his hands into his hip pockets. "Don't get tough, old-timer. All we want is—"

At that point his mate Straps nudged him as he glanced at the deceptive line running over the rail and no one apparently bothering with the man below. Orni noticed a swollen and discolored left eye on Straps.

"Your mistake, he chuckled to them. "You thought one of us was below and you'd have it easy here on deck."

Captain Taner's hands came out of his pockets and his jaw dropped open. He kept squinting at the line, then shifted to the hatchway leading to the cabin. He was visibly worried now, started backing away toward the rail.

"Billy!" Orni called. "Come and see the black eye you gave this punk!"

Billy came into view, holding the rifle leveled on the two intruders. He grinned at Straps.

Straps clenched his fists resentfully, stepped forward and his right hand went for the gun in his hip pocket.

"Halt!" Orni shouted at him. "Reach for that gun and my mate'll blow your head off! You boarded us, and I say you did so illegally! Now both o' you stand still!"

The way Billy held the rifle was enough to convince Straps and Captain Taner that this was no slip-shod game.

Taner grinned sickly and held out his

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hands. "We wanted to ask you about the pearl beds hereabouts," he said weakly. "Didn't we, Straps?"

Straps glared at Billy and Orni, but didn't answer.

"Just a friendly call," Taner went on excitedly. "Gray said you'd know the best locations in these—"

"You haven't any diving gear," Orni cut him off. "Stop lying and admit your mate and Weasel got you to agree to this scheme to get my big pearls." With that he motioned to his crew to close in. "And because you had your men threaten Ling Jong, now I'll threaten you. And just remember that we're the kind of men who are not afraid to use a bit o' violence."

Megu reached Taner and twirled the club before him. Taner's face turned pale.

"I'll have you and your crew before the R. M." Taner said meekly.

"You'll need witnesses," Orni pointed out. "Whatever Straps says to the R. M., my mate and crew'll deny it. Now, if you think you could see this whole thing our way, we might be a bit lenient in what I think is going to happen any second."

The Soholis crowded Straps.

"Agree to play our way," Orni went on, "and you'll not get a cracked skull." As he spoke he went up to Straps and reached under the man's coat, pulling out a small revolver. "Now where did you steal this?" he jeered. "I'll hold it for evidence." He tossed the gun aft, where Billy picked it up and tucked it under his belt.

Meantime the Soholis completely surrounded Straps, while Megu had Taner all to himself against the rail.

"Tell these blacks to stand away!" Taner yelled.

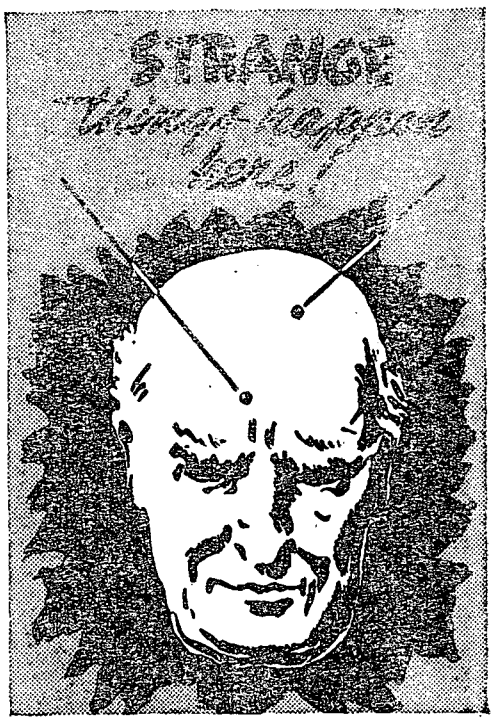
"I'll leave it up to you," Orni shrugged. "Either work for me, or get more than a good beating, and then get turned over to Doughan when he returns from Mereka."

Taner thought it over. "All right, all right."

The Soholis lowered their clubs and stepped back.

"Sit down, now, both o' you," Orni ordered and indicated the deck where the sun beat mercilessly on the dry and cracked wood.

Taner and Straps squatted down. Orni



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and Billy moved into the shade of the awning. Orni then took his time telling Taner what he wanted done.

Taner was to remain on board the lugger while Straps returned to their schooner and came back with the stolen pearls. "They're hardly more than seed pearls," Orni said, "but I want them back." Then, with Taner still on board Orni's lugger, Straps would go back to the schooner and both ships would sail to Taminig.

"And then," Orni rubbed his hands in a pleased way, "I want Straps to ram Gray's best schooner at her moorings. And I mean *ram!*"

Taner's and Straps' jaw fell open.

"But *that* means—"

"It means you'll ram Captain Gray's schooner. You'll damage his best ship, and you'll kinda do the same to your own. Aye, it'll mean repairs at Kotir for both o' you!"

Taner looked from the old pearler to the fierce-looking native crew and the clubs in their hands.

Orni shrugged at the man's reluctance. "You've no choice, Taner. You boarded us. My men'll testify to Doughan. Intent to rob. Piracy. We beat you up"—he grinned broadly—"a bit too much, but we couldn't help it. And I've no doubts Doughan'll find my pearls somewhere in your cabin. Now better decide pronto. Do as I say, or the D. O.'s jailhouse where you can nurse your wounds?"

Taner exchanged surly glances with his mate.

The sun was hot, as it is anywhere along New Guinea. The men were sweating. Every time they tried to move toward the shade, one of the Soholis would step out and begin twirling the club.

All the while Billy held the rifle ready.

There was nothing left for Taner to do but order Straps to carry out Orni's orders. So Straps clambered over the rail and was gone.

Orni was sure Straps would not dare bolt—no running out, no refusal now that he was back on his own ship, for the skipper, Captain Taner, was still prisoner on board the lugger.

Presently Straps rowed back, handed the pouch of stolen pearls to Orni and looked once more at Taner to see if perhaps an-

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other agreement had been made while he was gone. One look, and he knew. He resignedly got back into the longboat and rowed to the schooner.

Both ships now put about, heading along the reef wall toward Taminig. It was almost dusk by the time they reached the Point Passage.

Orni took a position by the rail and invited Captain Taner to watch the ramming. Taner declined at first, but then couldn't check his curiosity. He looked on, his ashen face twisted, his small eyes sunken.

The big schooner set her course for Gray's finest ship and bore down on her under the steady drive of her powerful Diesel.

She hit head on. The crash echoed in the still air; the moored ship rocked violently under the crushing impact. One of her masts snapped. Taner's schooner rose high in the sea, then fell back, her bow works crunching and twisting themselves into the sides of Gray's ship.

Orni watched impassively. "He did a good job," was all he said to Taner.

Taner groaned.

The two ships were soon listing badly. Orni got his glasses and watched the crews scurrying around the pumps.

The old pearler then faced Billy and Megu. "We'll moor at the west anchorage, and we'll see what my crooked competitor Gray will have to say now. Megu—you stay on board."

BY THE time Billy rowed them ashore, with Captain Taner sitting in the bow and brooding over his hard luck, Orni was pleased to see the furious Captain Gray shaking his fists seaward, where the two disabled ships were barely held afloat by the frenzied work of their crews on the pumps.

Disdainfully, Orni strolled past Gray, said, "That'll teach you."

Gray caught the inference. He glared from the old pearler to Captain Taner. "I'll —I'll—"

"You'll do nothing," Orni said evenly. "Tell him all about it, Taner. Tell him the whole story. You're a free man now. That ramming sure was a sad accident, wasn't it now?"

Taner took Gray aside and began telling

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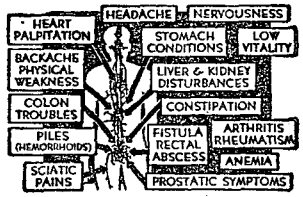

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him that Orni had them over the rail and that they couldn't do a thing without getting Doughan into the picture—which might mean jail.

"You're crazy!" Gray stormed. "He's got no witnesses!"

Gray had no sooner said that, when the elderly Chinese, Ling Jong, with his daughter Flower trailing at a discreet two-pace distance, came along.

"Ah," Jong greeted Orni. "Cap'n Buckson, I watched from the hill. I saw the—ah, accident." Leaning forward, with his hands folded across his silken robe, he whispered, "Also saw your ship, and Wa informed me Flower was accompanied home last night by your mate Mister Billy"—he sighed—"and Flower herself told me many things, so I know the—ah, accident was not an accident." He turned around and reached for Flower's hand, held it and gently patted with the pride of a father.

Billy stepped up. "Mister Jong,"" he began explaining, "I only took Miss Flower home after—well, we were at—"

"No matter now," Jong said amiably. "But I have thought deeply of the entire situation and"—he spoke loudly now, for Gray and Taner to hear him—"I will testify as you wished me to, Cap'n Buckson."

Orni rubbed his hands together triumphantly. "Ha! Gray! Hear that!"

Gray strode over. He wasn't as arrogant now. "Look here, Buckson. I'll make a deal with you. If you and Jong promise—"

"Promise!" Orni exploded indignantly. "We promise not a single thing! I've got you both helpless, and you want *me* to promise! Hear him, Jong!" He chuckled.

The Chinese joined the old pearler quietly with a titter, then changed again to seriousness. "Is so," he said solemnly. "If I am questioned, I tell truth. Mister Doughan will hear us." He nodded emphatically to show his words ended the issue as far as he was concerned.

Gray stood awkwardly, looked around. He looked at his listing ship. "All right," he scowled at last. "What's up your damned sleeve, Buckson?"

Orni chuckled. "Not a thing, Gray. It's all done. As I see it, you'll need two ships to tow your own and Taner's schooner to

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Kotir for repairs. You'll need another ship around you in case of trouble. That'll leave your small luggers here at Taminig, with not enough men to handle them, and it'll leave the pearl beds at Leki for me and Billy to fish."

Billy and Megu grinned.

Gray and Taner knotted their brows, but they realized the shrewd old pearler had been too much for them. They backed away.

Orni walked past them, smacked his lips together. "I'm a bit thirsty, Billy."

Billy smiled. "Okay, Pop. We'll all get a drink at Tobe's."

And this time even Ling Jong joined them, but first he instructed his daughter to go to the house and await them there with a big meal. "Prepare specially for Mister Billy," Jong said. He attempted to wink, but all that happened was a closing of both eyes.

Billy blushed. Flower smiled.

Orni Buckson burst out laughing. "Don't call me Pop," he said.

The Story Tellers' Circle

Redskins and Varmints

PROBABLY all of us remember the early movies with the shaky lighting and the squeaky organ. The first was unavoidable, the second indispensable. There was something else in these early flickers that was both unavoidable, and indispensible. The villain! That villain might have been the cruel slickster bent on foreclosing the mortgage and marrying Nell; but he might just as well have been an Indian. Many of our earliest and greatest films (like "The Iron Horse" and "The Vanishing American") dealt with frontier country and the advancing battle against the Indian. The Redskin was a natural villain. The historical fact that the Indian was often an innocent victim of the machinations of white men bothered neither cinema producers nor box office.

Which brings us to Caddo Cameron who

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always, nearly always, views the Indian with heap much sympathy in his Gunman stories. Writes Cameron:

"Naturally, all Indians were not as truthful and law-abiding as I usually make the redmen in these Gunmen stories. In the past I have, frankly, elected to use likeable Indians in my yarns for the simple reason that the Indian is generally the villain of the piece in published fiction. The tribes did produce their villains, though, even according to their lights, and one appears briefly in this story.

"In fact, one of the most vicious outlaws Oklahoma ever harbored was an Indian—Cherokee Bill. He was plenty tough. Once, when arrested and handcuffed, he broke the bracelets by sheer strength and after they finally landed him in jail at Fort Smith and Judge Parker sentenced him to death, he got hold of a gun and pretty nearly took the joint to pieces. It was another Indian outlaw, Henry Starr, himself under sentence of death, who calmed Bill down upon this occasion.

"And, by the way, this Henry Starr is my favorite outlaw of any period, ancient or modern. His picture was before me when I introduced Johnny Antelope, the Indian character who appears frequently with Mister Gunman, and Johnny is a physical replica of Henry. Otherwise, the resemblance is not a close one. Henry Starr was not a college man and after eighteen years of age he was a much more somber figure than I make of Johnny Antelope. Up to that time he had been an honest mixed-blood Cherokee boy of fine parentage. As a result of some community dirty work he was falsely arrested for horse-stealing, a capital offense in The Cherokee Nation, and it is said that Starr claimed to have become an outlaw in spirit that night while lying chained to a hotel bed with a deputy in the room. At any rate, there ensued for Henry Starr thirty-five years of bank and train robbery, imprisonment, and brief periods of attempted reformation. The shock and shame of that first arrest did something to the boy. He simply couldn't change his ways. So far as I have been able to learn, in all these years of lawlessness he killed only one man—a deputy shot in a duel on the road, and Starr invited and permitted the officer to take the first shot. Henry robbed his first bank at Bentonville, Arkansas and his last at Harrison, Arkansas, where he was killed on February 19, 1921.

"Incidentally, the popular belief that Henry Starr was Belle Starr's husband is a mistake. She married Sam Starr, a cousin of Henry's, and she didn't belong in the same league with Henry.

"I'd better be shufflin' along now. When I get to talking about Henry Starr I never know when to stop!" CADDO CAMERON.

On Pearls and Trouble

SAYS author Charles Yerkow:

"My character Orni Buckson, the old pearler, has been moving in and out of Taminig Island in the Arafura Sea, and I thought the readers of SHORT STORIES might want to know about where he was at. One glance at a good detailed map will show the vast clusters of Torres Strait Islands, separating Australia from New Guinea; to the east of the Strait you have the Queensland Waters, the northern tip of the Great Barrier Reef ending in Bramble Bay, and then the Coral Sea, while to the west the Arafura Sea, and, if you were to pull a straight line between Darwin and Thursday Island, you'd probably touch Taminig about half-way between these two points in the southern waters. Taminig is fictitious of course, but is faithfully patterned after the many islands in the Arafura and the Gulf of Papua.

"The main Taminig village, as I see it, is on the north, with lesser native villages dotting the island around and through the interior.

"Factually, the Torres Strait Islands are about the last place where truly great pearls are yet found. There is pearling off Ceylon and some of the South American coasts, but the Arafura is the queen of them all. From Ceylon a Ceylonese will travel to the odd corners of the world to ply his art, that of pearl peeler, and you find that he doesn't go much farther east than Samarai. Which ought to prove that the Arafura pearl beds are the richest, and I'm not talking about cultured pearls.

"Which reminds me—I'd like to tell you sometime about pearls and the dangers of pearling." CHARLES YERKOW.

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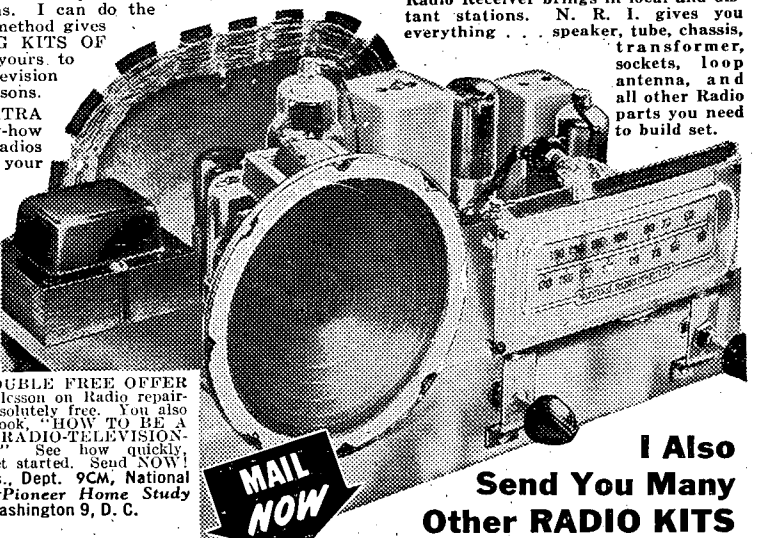

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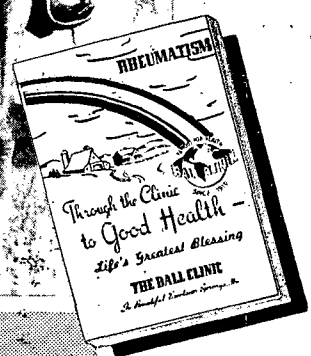

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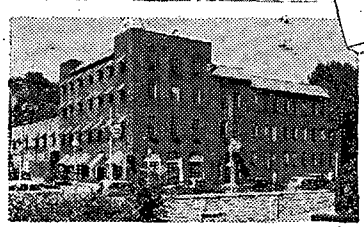

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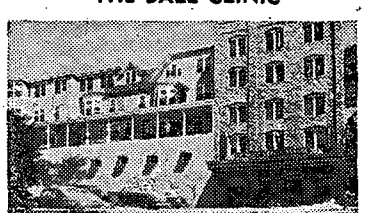

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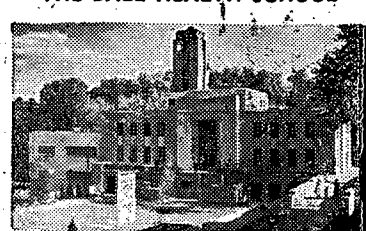

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